

Hollywood and History: Spike Lee's *Malcolm X*

A Thesis
Presented to
The School of Graduate Studies
Drake University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirement for the Degree
Master of Arts

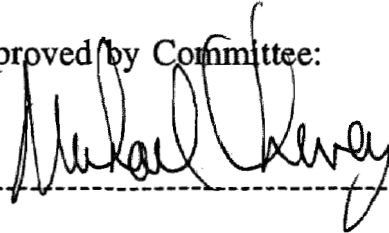
by
Jeffrey S. Febus
May 1994

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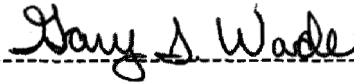
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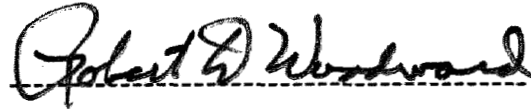
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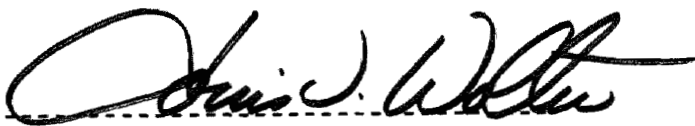
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The concept of "truthtelling" has become further clouded by Hollywood filmmakers who are using documentary film techniques in their recreations of historical events and figures. This master's thesis uses Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* as a case study on historical filmmaking in Hollywood. This thesis focuses on Lee's recreation of the life of Malcolm X in relationship to historical accuracy in a big budget Hollywood film.

In order to asses Lee's film within a proper context, this thesis first gives an introduction to the techniques of documentary and historical filmmaking. Next, Lee's personal history, film career, and the events leading up to the production of *Malcolm X* are presented. Then, the historical and cultural context of Malcolm's life in the present and past is discussed. Finally, Lee's *Malcolm X* is examined from a critical standpoint.

The critical analysis centers on how faithful Lee recreates the story of Malcolm X's life and he uses documentary and other film techniques in *Malcolm X*. The analysis also gives consideration to the financial demands of Hollywood and how they directly affect Lee's film.

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Introduction:

The debate between historical fiction and historical fact has long been an issue of film and media television theorists in regard to historical representations in documentary films and documentary television productions. The release of several biographical-historical films in the past few years, including Oliver Stone's *JFK*, Alek Kesheshian's *Truth or Dare*, Roger Spottiswoode's *And the Band Played On*, and Spike Lee's *Malcolm X*, had heightened the debate over historical accuracy in biographical-historical films and television shows.

This master's thesis explores how biographical-historical films portray historical accuracy using techniques of the documentary film. This thesis will focus on Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* as a case study. This thesis compares and contrasts Lee's version of Malcolm X's life with actual historical records, documents, written accounts, and personal recollections from those who knew Malcolm X during his lifetime.

In this study, historical accuracy will not be limited nor simply defined by the historical events, dialogue, and people surrounding Malcolm X. Instead, Lee's film will be assessed in terms of what Lee is trying to say *about* the life of Malcolm X. It will not be primarily evaluated by whether or not Lee's film merely recreates the precise historical life of Malcolm X. I am more concerned with the film's overall message rather than I am with a strict literal sense of historical documentation where every word spoken, piece of clothing

worn, or action depicted in the film, are judged as markers for historical truth and accuracy.

In the case study that I wish to examine, Spike Lee's *Malcolm X*, the debate has centered on the representation of an historical figure who "meant" or "symbolized" different things to different people. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, Malcolm X gained renewed popularity that had not been seen since Malcolm's days as a leader in the Nation of Islam during the 1960s. Part of the renewed popularity was due to Spike Lee's uncanny marketing touch with the "X" symbol. At the end of his popular 1989 film, Lee included a quote from Malcolm's famous "Ballot or the Bullet" speech that stated: "Violence in the act of self defense should be interpreted as intelligence, not violence." Following the release of *Do the Right Thing*, sales of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* increased immediately. By 1991, sales of the book had risen 300 percent.¹ The cover of the current paperback edition includes Lee's endorsement that states that the book "forever changed the direction of his life."

Besides endorsing *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Lee also began a mass marketing campaign of Malcolm X items following the release of *Do the Right Thing* including T-shirts, sweat shirts, baseball caps with the "X" insignia, posters, and other related items that proved to be very profitable for Lee. In short, Malcolm X products became a fashion statement among young blacks, a fact which has disturbed some historical scholars and those who followed Malcolm X closely during the 1960's. As black historian and Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates Jr. put it, "What's superficial about all of this is

that there are a lot of people running around with 'X' caps who ain't read the autobiography and ain't gonna read the autobiography. They've emptied Malcolm of all his complexity."²

Gates' criticism raised a long-debated question about Malcolm X: Who was the *real* Malcolm X? To some, Malcolm X represents black militancy and black power. Others, including Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, view Malcolm X as a great black hero. Still others view Malcolm X as a man who began to bridge the gap between blacks and whites later in his life. Other groups view Malcolm X as a status symbol and a fashion statement with the clothes that they wear, bearing the "X" insignia. The latter is particularly true for young blacks who became interested in Malcolm X during the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Malcolm X was a man who underwent numerous changes throughout a turbulent lifetime. It was a lifetime that can be split into three different sections: (1.) The gangster-hoodlum era before Malcolm's religious conversion to Islam, (2.) Malcolm's conversion to the Nation of Islam and ensuing militant years as a spokesman for black power, and (3.) The last three years of his life, including his split with the Nation of Islam and Elijah Muhammad; his pilgrimage to Mecca, his softened stance toward white people, and the final few days leading up to his assassination. To portray the complexity of Malcolm X on film has proven to be a difficult task for both filmmakers and screenwriters.

The original script for the movie life of Malcolm X was written in 1967 by James Baldwin, but his attempts to put the script onto film never paid off. White film directors Stuart Rosenberg, Sidney

Lumet, and Norman Jewison all attempted to portray the life of Malcolm X on film with their own scripts, and like Baldwin, they all failed. Jewison was slated to make the film for Warner Brothers based on a script written by black playwright Charles Fuller. However, after protests by Lee, Warner Brothers dropped Jewison from the project. Lee claimed that a white director could not do justice to a black historical figure like Malcolm X. "Malcolm X is one of our most treasured heroes," said Lee, "To let a non African-American do it is a travesty."³

Lee's persistence paid off when he was able to convince Warner Brothers to give him a shot at telling the Malcolm X story on film. However, Lee was met with some resistance. Amiri Baraka, the black nationalist poet, playwright, and spokesman for the United Front to Preserve the Legacy of Malcolm X, began a public outcry. He claimed that Lee would trash the political life of Malcolm X amid a stream of commercialism. "Based on the movies I've seen, I'm horrified of seeing Spike Lee make *Malcolm X*," said Baraka.⁴ Lee responded: "Even though Mr. Baraka has appointed himself grand 'poo-bah' of all blacks, artists don't do that. There are 39 million blacks in this country and I think more of them are on my side than on his."⁵

Despite the controversy surrounding the film, Lee finished filming *Malcolm X* in early 1992. He released the film to the public in November of that year. Lee based the film on an original script from Jewison and Arnold Perl that Lee rewrote himself. The final script, according to Lee, is based on *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. However, recent publications such as Bruce Perry's biography on

Malcolm X, spread doubt on Haley's book being used as an authoritative source. Perry's book, entitled *Malcolm: the Life of a Man Who Changed Black America*, is based on several hundred interviews with close associates and family members of Malcolm and points to a number of inaccuracies in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*.

In order to achieve my purpose of examining Lee's film from a critical standpoint, I shall first provide an introduction to film theory, distinguishing between the non-fiction film and the fiction film. I will also examine the difference between documentary films and docu-dramas. In order to lay the groundwork for the life of Malcolm X, several sources will be examined, including interviews with Malcolm X and his associates, previous documentary films made on his life, and biographical literature. Other sources will include Alex Haley's *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, and Bruce Perry's *Malcolm: the Life of a Man Who Changed Black America*.

The construction of Lee's film will be examined, including a review of Lee's production book, *By Any Means Necessary: The Trials and Tribulations of the Making of Malcolm X* in order to examine Lee's research and historical purpose for the film. Finally, the film itself will be examined, including a thorough analysis of the many reviews of Lee's film.

It should be noted that there are some limitations to this study. First of all, it is extremely difficult to completely examine all thirty-nine years and the three main stages of Malcolm X's life. Consequently, this study will particularly focus on the latter two stages of Malcolm X's life as portrayed in Lee's film. Some mention

will be given to the first stage of his life presented in Lee's film, but only in specific selection in order to conserve time and space.

Secondly, it should be noted that the life of Malcolm X is a "moving target" so-to-speak. Historians are continually digging up new evidence, new accounts, and new records that shed light on his life. Furthermore, it is impossible to capture *every* detail and *every* theme from a man's life on film, even if the film is more than three hours long. In no way, then is this study intended to be a complete and final analysis on the life of Malcolm X.

In conclusion, it is the aim of this master's thesis to examine the life of an historical figure as portrayed on film from a critical perspective for the further purpose of contributing towards the growing debate over what constitutes fact, and what constitutes fiction in regards to truth telling in historical-biographical films and television productions.

¹ David Ansen, Farai Chideya, and Marc Peyser, Vern E. Smith, and Lynda Wright. "The Battle for Malcolm X," *Newsweek* 29 Aug. 1991: 53.

² Charles Whitaker. "Who Was Malcolm X?" *Ebony* Feb. 1992: 119-124.

³ Anne Thompson. "Malcolm, Let's Do Lunch, " *Mother Jones* July/Aug. 1991: 25-29, 57.

⁴ Ansen, Chideya, and Peyser, Smith, and Wright, 52.

⁵ Evelyn Nieves. "Malcolm X: Firestorm Over a Filmscript," *The New York Times* 9 Aug. 1991: B2.

Chapter 1. Narrative Truth in the Documentary Film

I. Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the debate as to what constitutes a documentary film, and how documentary films portray historical accuracy within the context of a narrative framework. There are many definitions of what constitutes a documentary film. Perhaps the dominant theme of the documentary film tradition is the attempt by a documentarian through the medium of film, to find and explore a deeper historical truth or meaning to achieve a social purpose.

Some documentary theorists insist that truth can be achieved only through the direct representation of historical events. This "cinema verite," or "direct cinema," uses film as a mirror, projecting actualities and historical fact.

Other theorists and historians claim that all historical representations, whether they be from the printed word or the visual image, are manipulated to some degree and deviate from actual historical occurrences. These postmodern theorists claim that all visual representations are merely faked simulations of what once was considered to be "real" and "actual." Consequently, they believe absolute historical truth and actuality can never be achieved within the documentary film.

In contrast to critics of cinema verite' and postmodernism, other documentary theorists such as Carl Plantinga claim that documentary films are "assertions" of "states of affairs" occurring

within "projected worlds." These "fictive" elements and creative simulations in the documentary film lead to a deeper understanding of historical truth. According to these theorists, the "point of view" of the documentarian can more or less display historical truth through the documentarian's recreative "portrayal" of a "state of affairs" within a narrative framework. They see the possibility of communicating truth through documentary films that use fictionalized elements.

It is the thesis of this chapter that historical truth and accuracy within the context of the documentary film can be achieved through a variety of "fictive" elements, whether they are simulated, molded, or manipulated in some shape or form. These "fictive" elements, used within the context of "portrayals" in a narrative framework, are not necessarily historically accurate in a "literal" sense. They are instead used to draw out historical accuracy from the documentarian's "point of view" or stance. In short, this thesis holds that for a documentary to succeed, the "point of view" of the documentarian must assert historical truth even if the assertion of the documentarian does not portray historical events exactly as they originally occurred.

I argue that documentary film should be assessed in terms of what it tries to say *about* history, not primarily in terms of whether or not it merely recreates parts of history word for word and image for image. This is not to say that faithfulness in the representation of actual pro-filmic events is unimportant or meaningless in documentary films. Far from it. If a documentarian's depiction strays too far from the original pro-filmic event or events, then what

the documentarian is trying to say *about* history is weakened and lacks credibility. Nevertheless, the success of a documentary film is not based solely on how accurately the documentarian depicts every word and every event in the film. Instead, the success of a documentary film depends on how well the overall cinematic narrative captures the historical events depicted in the film.

This chapter will first explore various definitions of documentary film. I will then examine a number of historians who discuss how history can best be represented in "truthful form" on film. Finally, I will analyze various theories, contrasting fiction film with the documentary, and then theories contrasting postmodern imagery with the documentary film. All of this will be for the purpose of establishing a standard for evaluating historical documentary films and history portrayed on film as a whole.

II. What is a Documentary Film?

The term "documentary film" is said to have first been coined by filmmaker John Grierson in 1926 after reviewing Robert Flaherty's film *Moana*. Flaherty's *Nanook of the North*, an ethnographic film released in 1915 depicting the life of an Eskimo family, is acknowledged as documentary's original work.¹ Flaherty's *Nanook* depicted the Eskimo family's everyday activities ranging from fishing and hunting to living in an igloo. Eskimos had long since abandoned this way of life, but to preserve a vanishing way of life on film, Flaherty convinced Nanook and his family to "act out" and recreate their activities in special ways at special times. This enabled Flaherty to shoot his film like a fictional story about an Eskimo family's struggle to survive against the elements of nature. Although Flaherty's film was "fictionalized" to some degree with his control over his acting subjects, Flaherty was able to depict the larger theme of "man against nature" while documenting a way of life that no longer existed.²

Flaherty continued to use fictional techniques of narrative in his portrayals to elicit larger themes in later films, including *Nanook of the North*, *Man of Aran*, and *Louisiana Story*. Using Flaherty's work as a standard, Grierson later described the documentary as "the creative treatment of actuality," and Flaherty as "the father of documentary."³ In his writings, Grierson gives three principles in defining documentary film: (1.) The documentary should make its

selections from life itself, as opposed to in the studio, (2.) The documentary should film people going about their everyday lives rather than actors in a recreation, (3.) The documentary should chronicle real or "found" stories, as opposed to fabricated ones.⁴

Michael Rabinger's definition of the documentary also centers on the quest for actual historical representation. Writes Rabinger, "At its best, the documentary film reflects a fascination with, and a profound respect for, actuality. It is the very opposite of escapist entertainment, being committed to the richness and ambiguity of life as it really is."⁵

Although Grierson described documentary as "the *creative* treatment of actuality," some theorists claim that his first principles of documentary insist that documentary film must be as close to direct cinema or "cinema verite'" as possible. In their interpretation of Grierson's definition of documentary, the camera is simply turned on and records only what it views and sees with minimal outside interference to capture the "richness and ambiguity of life," as Rabinger defines it. In the case of "cinema verite,'" the camera simply observes, acting like a mirror reflecting "reality" in front of it. It does not teach, argue, or create, it merely reflects.

According to Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery, documentaries are films "which give up control before filming," so that virtually no editing is needed in postproduction as opposed to "after shooting" when the filmmaker selectively cuts and edits the film. Their definition of documentary, writes Allen and Gomery, "does recognize documentary as a form of cinema in which the filmmaker has relinquished *some* measure of control over *some*

aspect of the filmmaking process and by doing so implicitly claims *some* degree of 'truthfulness' or 'believability' for that film."⁶

In short, Allen and Gomery claim in their definition of the documentary film that the more control a filmmaker gives up and the less the filmmaker manipulates or *creates* in the film, the closer the film will stand by itself and achieve the purpose of portraying actuality. Consequently, films with ideological voice over narration, emotion charged music, and actors cast as historical figures, would not qualify as true documentary films.

According to Allen and Gomery's definition then, Flaherty's films would not fall underneath the definition of documentary films because Flaherty used manipulations in all of his films to represent his point of view. Furthermore, Flaherty had planned out his manipulations before he started filming the events of his narrative. In *Man of Aran*, for example, Flaherty auditioned various islanders to find those who fit his most ideal purpose. In *Nanook of the North*, Flaherty had Eskimos engage in a walrus hunt with harpoons, a practice that had been abandoned for many generations.⁷

But Flaherty's films are defined and known as documentaries. Why? According to Carl Plantinga, documentary films are defined by the stance or *point of view* taken by the documentarian which "colors" the entire text of the film. Plantinga states that in a documentary film, the producer *asserts* that a state of affairs portrayed in a "projected world" occur or did occur in actuality.⁸ In a fiction film, the audience is asked only to *consider* a state of affairs as portrayed in a "projected world."

Plantinga bases his notion of the "projected world" on the representational philosophy of Nicholas Wolterstorff. According to Wolterstorff, artists perform actions with works of art. The action that an artist uses with representational art is what Wolterstorff entitles "world projection."⁹ Wolterstorff's "projected world" consists of an often complex state of affairs that is projected or presented through the text or medium that the artist chooses to use.¹⁰

Therefore, in the text of a film, the "projected world" is effected by the discourse of various elements such as narration, structure, film techniques, and photographic images and sounds.¹¹ These elements are what Plantinga calls "intrinsic elements." Plantinga states that a documentary film is also defined by how it is "indexed," or labelled by the producer in the promotion of the film to the public.

"Indexing" often takes place in the form of film credits, titles, publicity, press releases, interviews with producers, directors, technicians, and by word of mouth. Consequently, the audience does not have to guess whether the film is a documentary or not.¹²

Along with the indexing of film as documentary, comes certain expectations by the audience in today's Western society, according to Plantinga. "On the global level, we expect from the prototypical documentary a certain informational value and seriousness of purpose," says Plantinga. "More important, at the global level, we expect a production process which refrains from tampering with the pro-filmic event, and which results in a photographic record of reality."¹³ Nevertheless, Plantinga admits that many documentaries mix characteristics of what are thought to be fiction or documentary as in the case of the films of Robert Flaherty. As a result, Plantinga

states that "it is most fruitful to think of the documentary not in terms of unchanging or universal intrinsic properties, but more as a socially constructed category which is fluid and maleable; it changes with history."¹⁴

In short, "indexing" a film is a social construct in determining what is a documentary film and what is not. "What distinguishes the documentary from fiction is the way a text is indexed, and not necessarily certain techniques or textual characteristics thought to be appropriate to the documentary," writes Plantinga. "The documentary genre is best distinguished from fiction not on the basis of intrinsic properties, but according to the extrinsic factors of indexing and the stance taken toward the world projected through the discourse."¹⁵ However, since the documentarian's stance or "point of view" is portrayed through the "projected world" of the film, and the "projected world" is effected by intrinsic elements such as narration, film structure, and photographic images and sounds, intrinsic elements must be considered in a documentary film as they help determine the documentarian's stance or "point of view."

Nevertheless, a film is not defined as documentary by intrinsic elements, such as where the camera is placed, how the film is edited, or what images are portrayed through the camera's eye. Instead, according to Plantinga, the documentary film is defined by the extrinsic properties of the stance or "point of view" of the documentarian, and how the documentarian chooses to index the film.

In the case of Robert Flaherty, his films are defined as documentaries by film theorists because Flaherty first *asserts* that

the state of affairs as portrayed in the film have occurred in actuality. Flaherty *asserts* that Eskimos once hunted walruses with spears and he *asserts* that Eskimos actually did live in igloos at one time. Although the characters in his films may have been cast in a "fictive" form, the stance that Flaherty takes toward them through their portrayal is still historically accurate. Secondly, Flaherty's films have become labeled or "socially indexed" as documentary films. Grierson himself has promoted and acclaimed Flaherty's films as "socially conscious" documentaries and thus they are conceived to be so by the audience because of the way the film has been promoted to them.

Although Flaherty's films are distinguished as documentaries, Plantinga acknowledges that the distinction between a documentary film and a fiction film is not always easy. "It should be kept in mind that the distinction between documentary and fiction is often precarious," says Plantinga. "Some categories other than the documentary, such as that of U.S. Senator, are clearly defined with well-marcated boundaries. The categories of documentary and the fiction film, on the other hand, have fuzzy boundaries and gradations of membership. Some films will be central examples of the documentary category, others not."¹⁶

Furthermore, Plantinga acknowledges that a documentary film can hypothetically lie in assertions. "My characterization of the documentary assumes no necessarily representation of the facts or the truth," he says. "It merely points to making assertions about actuality as the function of documentary films. *The characterization does not evaluate the verity of those assertions.*"¹⁷

Building on the definitions of documentary film by Rabinger and Plantinga, I believe that the documentary film does reflect a fascination with and a profound respect for, actuality; and it is committed to the richness and ambiguity of life as it really is. However, that does not imply that a documentary film must use intrinsic properties or styles such as *cinema verite*'. The documentary film is defined by the extrinsic factors of what the producer asserts to be true and how the film is indexed. A documentary film may use a variety of intrinsic properties that are manipulated and "fictive" in order to portray actuality and the richness and ambiguity of life, through the documentarian's point of view. Yet there must be a seriousness of purpose in the point of view of the documentarian that the state of affairs presented in the film occur or did occur.

What I am arguing, then, is that documentary films are not limited by any intrinsic properties or any intrinsic format. However, since the documentarian's point of view is directly effected by intrinsic properties and since the indexing of a film as a documentary requires the documentarian to use intrinsic properties with a seriousness of purpose, intrinsic properties within a documentary film, must be closely observed so that the "verity" of the documentarian's assertions can be measured.

III. History on Film

Can history be represented accurately on film? And how does history represented by the visual image compare with history represented by the printed word? Historian Hayden White separates history recorded by the visual image and history recorded by the written word into two camps, *historiography*, and *historiophoty*. *Historiography* according to White "is the representation of history in verbal images and written discourse." *Historiophoty*, on the other hand is what White describes as "the representation of history and our thought about it in visual images and filmic discourse."¹⁸ White acknowledges that cinema and video are better suited than written discourse to the actual representation of certain historical phenomenon such as landscape, scene, atmosphere, and complex events such as wars, battles, crowds, and emotions.

However, White also believes that *historiography* may be better suited to explaining more complex and critical dimensions of history because of the time constraints placed on films.¹⁹ Says historian David Herlihy, "film cannot easily explore beneath surfaces and illuminate the desires or motives that drive behavior. Film can only hint at motives through actions and hope that the audience catches the implications correctly."²⁰

But according to historian Robert Rosenstone, all recorded history, whether it is recorded visually or verbally, is fictitious. It is based on the fact that people do not live "historical" lives in the sense that their lives fit in a clear coherent story form with a beginning,

middle, and an end. "History," says Rosenstone, "is a never ending continuum. It is the role of historians then, to craft, shape, and create history into a narrative form in order to make sense of history and give it meaning."²¹ As a result, all recorded history is "fictionalized" to some degree because it is crafted in the narrative form by the historian.

Rosenstone also states that neither history books nor historical films are "windows of the past, merely reflecting reality." They are instead "constructions of the past" that handle evidence from the past within a certain framework of possibilities and a framework of practice. In summary, according to both Rosenstone and White, both *historiography* and *historiophoty* use "fictive" elements in an attempt to portray historical accuracy.

In regards to the historical documentary film, Rosenstone states, "The documentary is never a direct reflection of an outside reality but a work consciously shaped into a narrative, thereby creating the meaning of the material being conveyed."²² "Meaning" in a historical film is achieved through the use of "fictions" or "fictive elements" used within the narrative framework according to Rosenstone. "There are many tiny fictions all over the place in a historical film, ranging from things said, to clothes worn, to actors portrayed, to furniture used on the set," says Rosenstone. "All of these 'fictions' lead to larger inventions which add and give meaning to the true reality of the film."²³

All of the intrinsic properties that Rosenstone calls "fictions" or "fictive elements" in a historical film, particularly a historical documentary film, are chosen by the producer to display his or her

point of view. "The documentarist makes endless choices," says Robert Brent Toplin. "He selects topics, people, vistas, angles, lenses, juxtapositions, sounds, and words. Each selection is an expression of his point of view, whether he is aware of it or not, whether he acknowledges it or not."²⁴ What determines whether or not the producer's point of view is truthful or historically accurate then is related to the *type* of event represented in the documentary film according to White. "The truthfulness of the sequence is not to be found at the level of concreteness, but rather at another level of representation, that of *typification*," says White.²⁵ In terms of Carl Plantinga's theory of a documentary film being that "of a state of affairs asserted to be true in a projected world," White's statement of truth could be interpreted to be viewed as the *type* or *typification* of an event or state of affairs *asserted* to be true in a projected world or representation. In short, *typification* is how a documentarian *asserts* a "state of affairs" to be true.

The entire notion of history represented on film brings up an important distinction, the difference between a historical film presented as fiction, and a historical film presented as documentary. Perhaps one of the defining films in the debate over historical fiction and historical fact, is Oliver Stone's recent film, *JFK*, focusing on the 1963 assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Stone's film mixes in sequences of actual "verite" footage taken of the assassination and simulated "verite" footage of his own that he uses to express his "point of view" that the assassination of President Kennedy was surrounded by a fascist plot by the American government.

So is Stone's film a documentary? In his analysis of *JFK*, Martin J. Medhurst states that the goal of a historian is "to create reality through critical engagement with the various symbolic constructions of the past which in turn are brought into dialogue with other "histories" in an attempt to construct that which is real and truthful."²⁶ Stone certainly has constructed his own symbolic version of the past, but does he *assert* or actually claim that his version of the assassination plot actually occurred?

According to Linda Williams, Stone does not assert his version of the assassination plot to have actually happened. Instead, his assertion is that the official report of the Warren Commission on the death of President Kennedy is untrue and that as a result, he has constructed a narrative that is entirely fictional to protest the official historical version released by the Warren Commission which he in turn believes to be entirely fictional.²⁷ If that is the case, Stone's film is not a documentary.

Stone's' fictional version of the assassination may lead others to re-examine the assassination and later find a deeper thematical historical truth, but he does not *assert* his own version or portrayal of the state of affairs of the assassination to be historically true. Instead, he only asks the audience to *consider* a number of conspiracy theories, or in other words, to *consider* a "state of affairs." Therefore, his film is not a documentary.

In summary, history can be accurately represented with both the printed word and the visual image. Both *historiography* and *historiophoty* can be historically accurate. However, both conventions use "fictive" elements as historians must interfere with

the continuum of history in order to construct history into narrative frameworks that allow historians to discover historical truths. With regard to historical documentary films, historical truths, although they contain "fictive" elements, must be *asserted* to be true or to have happened in actuality by the filmmaker. If they are not, the film is not a documentary.

To further distinguish the difference between narrative truth and narrative fiction with regard to historical accuracy, a further analysis between the fiction film and the documentary film is warranted.

IV. The Fiction Film Versus the Documentary Film

Although a documentary film may use "fictive" elements, the documentary film is not a fiction film. Therefore, the documentary film may also be described as a nonfiction film although it may include "fictive" or "fictionalized" elements. Working in relation to Jacques Derrida's claim that "truth 'declares itself in a structure of fiction,'"²⁸ Michael Renov states that nonfiction film "contains any number of 'fictive' elements, moments at which a presumably objective representation of the world encounters the necessity of creative intervention."²⁹

Some of these "fictive" elements, according to Renov, include: (1.) The construction of character in a film in the category of a hero or genius, (2.) The use of poetic language, narration, or musical accompaniment to heighten emotional impact or the creation of suspense via embedded narratives, (3.) The use of high or low camera angles, close-ups which trade emotional response for spatial integrity, (4.) The use of editing to make time contract, expand, or become rhythmic, and other techniques that could be described as "fictive."

"What I am arguing is that documentary shares the status of all discursive forms with regard to its tropic or figurative character and it employs many of the methods and devices of its fictional counterpart," says Renov. "With regard to the complex relations between fiction and the documentary, it might be said that the two

domains *inhabit* one another."³⁰ Therefore, according to Renov, "fictionalized" elements inhabit the documentary film. However, these "fictive" elements are intrinsic to the film's larger extrinsic theme or meaning as Carl Plantinga argues.

As already noted, Plantinga defines a documentary film as a film where the producer *asserts* that the state of affairs or the events in the film occur or occurred. Plantinga bases his definition of documentary film on Nicholas Wolterstorff's theory of art. According to Wolterstorff, the stance taken by an artist of fiction is the *fictive* stance. Wolterstorff states that "To take up the fictive stance toward some state of affairs is not to *assert* the state of affairs portrayed in the film to be true, is not to *ask* whether it is true, is not to *request* that it be true. It is simply to invite us to consider that state of affairs."³¹

Likewise, an artist of nonfiction, particularly an artist of documentary film, *asserts* the state of affairs portrayed in the film to be true. "The distinction between the fiction film and the documentary, then, can be fruitfully made according to the stance taken toward the world projected by the film. With respect to fiction, the stance is fictive; with respect to the documentary, it is assertive," says Plantinga.³²

Consequently, a documentary film is distinguished from a fiction film by the filmmaker's extrinsic stance or point of view taken toward the film. If the filmmaker asserts the state of affairs in the film occur or did occur, then the film is a documentary film. If the filmmaker only asks us to consider the state of affairs in the film, then the film is a fiction film. Intrinsic factors such as shot selection,

editing sequence, character narration, and camera placement may be fictionalized within a documentary film.

However, they must be "fictionalized" with the extrinsic stance that although these intrinsic properties are not direct representations of reality, they did or do occur in some form of actuality. In other words, intrinsic properties within the context of a documentary film, "color" the extrinsic stance or "point of view" of the documentarian. However, in the fiction film, states of affairs are presented for the consideration and contemplation of the audience not as an account of actual events or a description of characteristics of the actual world as is the case with the documentary film, but as an imaginary construct for our entertainment and/or edification.³³

The intrinsic elements or images depicted by the camera within a film such as actors and actresses, studio or location settings, particular schemes of music, and other props are what Philip Rosen describes as "documents" which according to Rosen, "represent a film shot comprehended as an indexically traced record of a pre existent, pro-filmic field."³⁴ Every frame of film is an individual "document." For example, a frame of film depicting an Eskimo attempting to kill a walrus in *Nanook of the North* is a document, as is a frame of film depicting President Kennedy riding in a convertible in a Presidential motorcade in *JFK*. But for a "document" to be contained within a "documentary" film, the "document" must be *asserted* to occur or to have occurred. However, according to theorists in the postmodern tradition, filmic "documents" are not representations of reality, only faked simulations of what once was reality and therefore cannot portray historical truth. Consequently, an analysis of postmodern

theory must be discussed in regards to historical truth and accuracy.

V. The Postmodern Debate

One of the leaders of current postmodern theory, Frederic Jameson, describes the "cultural logic of postmodernism" as a "new depthlessness" which finds its prolongation both in contemporary 'theory' and in a whole new culture of the image or simulacrum."³⁵ Jameson's theory is centered on the present boom of electronic information technology that has arisen in Western capitalistic society and has allowed images to be reproduced in mass amounts for mass consumption by the public. For example, a photograph or "document" shot on film during the recent Gulf War, could be developed in a small machine out in the desert. The developed photograph could then be distributed world wide via satellite to newspaper chains. The newspaper chains would then reproduce the image in mass quantities.

To Jameson, the effect of this "image" culture is a weakening of historicity, particularly in documentary films. Images that were once "mirrors with memories" only reflect other mirrors or other images. With so many images that are repeatedly copied and simulated, authentic reality no longer exists and a new "depthlessness in imagery" is created.

In a recent book on postwar West German cinema and its representations of that country's past, Anton Kaes says, "The sheer mass of historical images transmitted by today's media weakens the link between public memory and personal experience. The past is in danger of becoming a rapidly expanding collection of images, easily retrievable but isolated from time and space, available in an eternal

present by pushing a button on the remote control. History thus returns forever as film."³⁶

Postmodern theorist Jean Baudrillard interprets the "depthlessness of imagery" as an "implosion of imagery" where an image or "document" is replaced by a copy of another "document," thereby causing an "implosion" of the boundaries of reality and historical accuracy. Baudrillard states that this "implosion of imagery" is caused not by a lack of imagery, but by an excess of information.³⁷

With such an excess of information and with so many documents created by new mass media technology, it is impossible to determine what is real and what is merely another copy or "simulation." For example, is the verite' footage of the Zapruder film in Oliver Stone's *JFK* a representation of reality? Is Stone's simulated verite' footage of the assassination of President Kennedy a representation of reality? With so many images and so many simulations, there is no authentic reality or authentic account according to Baudrillard. Instead, reality is replaced by what Baudrillard calls a "hyperreal," a reality of false images. Baudrillard states then, that every image is "simulacra," which in other words, is a simulated image or representation.³⁸ Therefore, there is no historical truth with imagery in film according to Baudrillard because an image will refer to another image that will refer to yet another image, and so on.

Consequently, there is a yearning for the "real" or the "authentic" in the postmodern debate, a "real" and an "authentic" that can never be achieved by the visual image.

Perhaps the ultimate symbol or "simulation" of Baudrillard's theory of the simulacrum, is pop music star Madonna. Constantly reshaping her body, the color of her hair, the clothes she wears, and the subjects that she chooses to focus upon, Madonna has been called a "chameleon" and a "teflon doll" because nothing "sticks to her."³⁹ In 1990, Madonna and producer Alek Keshishian released a film documenting her "Blonde Ambition Tour" entitled *Truth or Dare*. The film was promoted (or indexed) as a documentary film, revealing "the true Madonna." In promotional posters, Madonna posed with a completely exposed backside with the words "All Access" printed on her skin. In short, *Truth or Dare* was promoted to be the film that "lifted the mask off of Madonna" and revealed her "real self."

In the film, Keshishian uses a variety of techniques, mixing black and white footage shot backstage in a cinema verite' style along with concert footage shot in color. The black and white verite' footage is intended by Keshishian to be the most "revealing" as the camera follows Madonna around backstage and "documents" her relations with her dance group and her then boyfriend Warren Beatty. Among the "revealing" scenes, we see Madonna undressing in front of the camera, swearing repeatedly at her manager, bossing her dance group around like a "mother hen," and being examined for a throat infection by her doctor.

But is this the "real" Madonna? Or is this Madonna in another example of the "hyperreal?" There is no doubt that Madonna had some control over the final editing of the film and that she probably chose to "reveal" what she wanted to of herself in the film. Furthermore, she likely chose how to "act" while in front of the

camera. Says Beatty while Madonna's throat is being examined, "Turn the camera off? She doesn't want to live off-camera, much less talk." In other words, most of the film is composed of more simulations and a false sense of hyperreality. Therefore, according to the theories of Baudrillard and Jameson, Madonna's film has no depth, no authenticity, no truth, and is not a documentary.

According to Phillip Rosen, Baudrillard misses the point. "What he consequently misses in his theory, is that film's status as a cultural object rests in great part on what is documentary rather than document," says Rosen.⁴⁰ In other words, according to Rosen, what Baudrillard and the rest of the postmodern theorists are missing is that historical truth and accuracy are not guaranteed by the "document" itself, but instead through the assertive stance taken by the producer in the documentary as a whole. Madonna and Kesheshian may have simulated and staged large portions of *Truth or Dare* and many of the "documents" within the film may have been fictionalized. Yet the notions that Madonna is power hungry, organized, a health freak, and an impulsive woman, are asserted to be true in the film, even if the documentation of these truths has been staged or simulated to some degree. Furthermore, Kesheshian asserts that the film in its narrative framework of the 1990 "Blonde Ambition Tour," reveals truths about Madonna in his indexing of the film as a documentary.

Postmodern theorists pass over the fact that historical truth in the documentary is achieved through the producer's point of view in the film as a whole, not through the many "documents" that act as visual representations of a state of affairs.

In the case of Errol Morris' 1987 documentary film, *The Thin Blue Line*, simulations are used in an obvious manner in an attempt to reconstruct historical truth within a narrative framework. The plot of *The Thin Blue Line* is centered on the murder of a police officer in 1976 and the near execution of a man falsely accused in the murder. Morris constructs the narrative framework around a series of interviews with individuals who recount their own interpretations of the events of the night of the murder. As the individuals give their interpretations of the events of the murder, Morris reenacts each witnesses' account through a series of visual simulations drawn out in slow motion and aided by a haunting musical score.

Morris does not assert that any of the simulations are true or that any of the simulations actually represent "what exactly occurred" on the night of the murder. But through his visual simulations, Morris constructs a narrative that eventually points to the murderer and elicits a confession from the "real" man who killed the police officer. Morris' style of documentary is what Linda Williams terms a "self reflexive" style of documentary film where the producer manipulates the events of the documentary film in order to construct an ideology of historical truth.⁴¹

Says Morris in defense of his self reflexive style of documentary, "There is no reason why documentaries can't be as personal as fiction filmmaking and bear the imprint of those who made them. Truth isn't guaranteed by style or expression. It isn't guaranteed by anything."⁴² According to Morris, then, truth is not denied by simulations or reconstructions of imagery or a state of

affairs. Truth is not denied by fictive accounts or reconstructions of the documentarian, but instead is enhanced by them.

Williams states that:

truth is not guaranteed and cannot be transparently reflected by a mirror, yet some kinds of partial and contingent truths are nevertheless the always receding goal of the documentary tradition. Instead of careening between idealistic faith in documentary truth and cynical recourse to fiction (in reference to Stone's *JFK*), we do better to define documentary not as an essence of truth, but as a set of strategies designed to choose from among a horizon of relative and contingent truths.⁴³

Williams adds that:

Documentary is not fiction and should not be conflated with it. But documentary can and should use all of the strategies of fictional construction to get at truths. The lesson is thus not at all that postmodern representation inevitably succumbs to a depthlessness of the simulacrum, or that it gives up on truth to wallow in the undecidabilities of representation.⁴⁴

In other words then, Williams argues that "simulations" can contribute to the historical accuracy of documentary films rather than diminish their authenticity.

In summary, in a postmodern world of imagery, all images are simulated or manipulated to some degree. Even images that are

portrayed in a verite' style are manipulated by the person holding the camera and the direction that the camera is pointed. Just because an image is a simulation or manipulated to some degree, however, does not mean that the image cannot represent truth and historical accuracy in some form. Postmodern theorists who state that all simulations are false representations are mired in the same dilemma of those who insist that truth in documentary film can only be represented by direct cinema.

Truth is portrayed through assertions and the documentarian's point of view, not necessarily by direct representations of events. Therefore, simulations or recreations can portray actual historical events as an *assertion* about a real historical state of affairs, just as effectively as those of direct cinema, which in turn are only simulations and recreations themselves.

VI. "Docudrama" and "Documentary."

A number of recent films, including Stone's *JFK*, and Roger Spottiswoode's HBO television film *And The Band Played On*, have been labeled or "indexed" as "docudramas," and not necessarily "documentaries." These films have been indexed as docudramas because they use intrinsic elements such as voice over narration, black and white "newsreel" footage, personal interviews, and photographic documents from the actual pro-filmic event. These intrinsic elements have long been associated with the "classical" documentary film. Yet these films have not been necessarily indexed as "documentaries" by critics because the films do not use a consistent style of *cinema verite'*, but instead use recreations and reconstructions to portray events.

Is there a difference between documentaries and docudramas or are they one and the same? For example, are Robert Flaherty's films docudramas, documentaries, or both? I argue that docudramas can be documentaries, but in order for them to be so, the producer of the "docudrama" must take an *assertive* stance toward the state of affairs portrayed in the film.

Referring back to Carl Plantinga's definition of the documentary film again, documentary films are films where the producer *asserts* that the state of affairs depicted within the film occur or did occur. Therefore, a documentary film is not defined by any intrinsic qualities within the film, and it is not limited by any intrinsic style that may be associated with documentary films in a "classical sense."

Documentaries are instead defined by the extrinsic stance taken by the producer of the film.

Referring to Michael Renov's description of the documentary film as well, the domains of fiction and documentary "inhabit one another." Therefore, documentary films contain "fictive elements," and may use "fictive elements" such as recreations and stage dramatic events to portray historical events.

Consequently, films that are labeled "docudramas" because of their "fictive" styles and elements, may be documentary films as well, so long as the extrinsic stance by the film's producer is assertive. However, films labeled as "docudrama" such as Oliver Stone's *JFK* are not documentary films because the producer does not assert that all of the events within the film occur or did occur.

In conclusion, films labeled as "docudramas" may be documentaries as well. Not all "docudramas" are documentaries, but the two terms may be one and the same if the extrinsic stance taken by the producer of the film is assertive.

VII. Conclusion:

In conclusion, it is the aim of the documentarian to *assert* truth about actual history within the text of a documentary film. If the documentarian does not *assert* that the state of affairs portrayed occur or did occur, then the film is not a documentary film. What the documentarian asserts to be true in the documentary film is what can be understood to be the documentarian's point of view.

The point of view of the documentarian is related to the audience through the documentarian's *portrayal* of events within a narrative framework. The documentarian creates a narrative framework with a beginning, middle, and end, through a portrayal of events in order to display historical accuracy and truth. It is the goal of the historian to give meaning to history by shaping history into a narrative framework. Likewise, the documentarian works as a visual historian by shaping historical events into a narrative framework. Such an ideal history occurs within an endless continuum without a clear beginning, middle, and end. Therefore, by shaping history into a narrative framework, the historian and the documentarian "fictionalize" history by shaping history within their own creative framework. Consequently, all historians, including makers of documentary films, use "fictive" elements in order to express their point of view regarding historical events.

Although these fictive elements may act as simulations and manipulations, they still *assert* truth within the context of the documentary film. Documentary films may use "fictive" elements, but documentary films are not fiction films. Even documentary films

using footage in the style of direct cinema are not absent of manipulations. In direct cinema, camera people control the direction and sightline of the camera, and editors choose what footage to be used. Although all visual images are manipulated and simulated to some degree, imagery is not lost within a "depthlessness" of simulation or signification. Historical truth is based on assertion, not direct representation.

Therefore, all documentary films are manipulated to some degree or another, using fictive elements within the narrative framework of the film. Nevertheless, these fictive elements work as intrinsic factors in order to portray historical truth and accuracy within the documentary film.

The purpose of this introductory chapter to documentary film theory is to lay a foundation for understanding how history is portrayed on film and how its subject matter relates to historical accuracy. In the remaining chapters, my purpose will be to explain how Lee uses conventions of documentary film in relation what he says *about* the life of Malcolm X in his historical portrayal of him. My purpose will not be to argue whether or not Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* is a documentary, docudrama, or a work of escapist entertainment.

Before the film can be examined however, the background of Spike Lee and his attempts to put the life of Malcolm X on film must first be considered.

¹ Michael Rabinger. *Directing the Documentary* (Boston: Focal Press, 1987), 11.

² Ibid., p. 11.

³ John Grierson. *Grierson on Documentary*, Ed. by Forsyth Hardy. (New York and Washington: Prager Publishers, 1966), 147.

- 4 Ibid., p. 146, 147.
- 5 Rabinger, 4.
- 6 Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery. *Film History: Theory and Practice*, p. 216.
- 7 Carl Planting. "A Theory of Representation in the Documentary Film," (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin at Madison, 1989): 34.
- 8 Ibid., p. 47.
- 9 Ibid., p. 27.
- 10 Ibid., p. 27.
- 11 Ibid., p. 8.
- 12 Ibid., p. 32.
- 13 Ibid., p. 24.
- 14 Ibid., p. 24.
- 15 Ibid., p. 47.
- 16 Ibid., p. 25.
- 17 Ibid., p. 42.
- 18 Hayden White. "Historiography and Historiophoty," *American Historical Review* 93:5 (December, 1988): 1193.
- 19 Ibid., p. 1193.
- 20 David Herlihy. "Am I a Camera? Other Reflections on Films and History," *American Historical Review* 93:5. (December, 1988): 1190.
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- 23 Robert Rosenstone. "JFK: Historical Fact/Historical Film," *American Historical Review* 97:2. (April, 1992): 509.
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- 29 Michael Renov. "Introduction: the Truth About Non-Fiction," *Theorizing Documentary* Ed. by Michael Renov. (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 2.
- 30 Ibid., p. 2-3.
- 31 Nicholas Wolterstorff. *Art in Action* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 134. Wolterstorff also discusses art and fiction in his book, *Works and Worlds of Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980).
- 32 Plantinga, 30.
- 33 Ibid., p. 29.
- 34 Phillip Rosen. "Document and Documentary," *Theorizing Documentary*, Ed. Michael Renov. (New York and London, 1993), 72.

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- 35 Frederic Jameson. "The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1984), 84.
- 36 Anton Kaes. *From Hitler to Heimat: the Return of History as Film* (Cambridge, 1989), 198.
- 37 Jean Baudrillard. "Simulacra and Simulations," *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*. Ed. by M. Poster. (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1988), 210.
- 38 Ibid., p. 167.
- 39 David Tetzlaff. "Metatextual Girl," *The Madonna Connection*. Ed. by Cathy Schwichtenberg. (Boulder, San Francisco, Oxford, Westview Press, 1993), 259.
- 40 Rosen, 87.
- 41 Williams, 12.
- 42 Errol Morris. "Truth Not Guaranteed: An Interview With Errol Morris," *Cineaste*, 17. (1989): 17.
- 43 Williams, 14.
- 44 Ibid., p. 20.

Chapter 2. The Attempts to Put the Life of Malcolm X on Film and an Introduction to Spike Lee and His Films

One of the difficulties with representing an historical figure on film is drafting a script that portrays that figure accurately and fairly. Furthermore, once a workable script has been reached, the production costs of the film often force the script to be altered. Such was the case with representing the life of Malcolm X on film.

The film rights to Malcolm X's life were purchased by film producer Marvin Worth from Malcolm's wife, and Alex Haley who co-wrote *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* shortly after Malcolm's death. Worth first hired screenwriter James Baldwin in 1967 to come up with a workable script for a film on Malcolm's life to be produced by Columbia Pictures. After a year of struggling with Columbia Pictures, Baldwin quit the project, leaving the script unfinished. Arnold Perl, the late blacklisted screenwriter, picked up Baldwin's project and completed the 220 page script, about twice as long as the average screenplay. Perl's script was based on Haley's *Autobiography of Malcolm X* and focused particularly on Malcolm's early years as a street hustler. It gave less mention to his conversion to Islam, pilgrimage to Mecca, and later activism.¹

Despite the finished script, Worth opted to hold off production. "The material was too volatile," said Worth. "Obligatory scenes had to be in it. There was no proof of what happened, say between him and Elijah Muhammad, or what was behind his split with the Muslims."² Part of the problem for Worth and the screenwriters that he had hired, was that little research or documentation had been done on

the *private* life of Malcolm X up to that point. The media had given a great deal of attention to Malcolm's *public* life, but there was still a great deal of information to be known about Malcolm's *private* life before Worth could move ahead.

As a result, Worth opted to place the project on the backburner until 1973 when he produced a shortened one hour documentary entitled *Malcolm X*. The documentary featured voice over narration from James Earl Jones and press interviews and newsreel footage from Malcolm's public life that Worth later described as "*real* footage."³ The documentary earned respectable reviews and an Academy Award nomination, but it was still not the large scale project that Worth had envisioned. Worth kept the project in the background saying, "There was more truth in the documentary than you could put in a movie."⁴

In 1983, actor Richard Pryor's lawyer came to Worth with a package deal with Warner Brothers that had Pryor playing Malcolm X. It proposed using a script written by David Mamet and to be directed by Sidney Lumet. Worth accepted the package but later rejected Mamet's script. He feared that the long stylized speeches in the script from Malcolm's life, would portray Malcolm too far on the left politically. Furthermore, the projected cost of the film was at least \$20 million, causing Warner Brothers to fear that the film would not make money at the box office. Said Worth, "We wanted a movie that was honest and a great piece of entertainment. Something that we would have a lot of pride in. We kept starting over again and nobody ever wanted to look at anybody else's material."⁵

In 1983, screenwriter David Bradley was hired to develop a script. In 1986, he presented a 138 page script based on Alex Haley's epilogue in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, using a flashback-ridden story between Malcolm and Haley. Bradley's script received some attention when Eddie Murphy expressed interest in playing the role of Haley in a joint Warner Brothers-Paramount Pictures production. However, the venture died after Paramount attempted a hostile takeover of Warner Brothers.

In 1990, Worth and Warner Brothers signed white director Norman Jewison to direct the film based on a screenplay by black writer Charles Fuller. It proposed actor Denzel Washington in the role of Malcolm X. Like the others before him, however, Fuller was unable to come up with a workable script and the film was never made. Jewison and Fuller's attempts to complete the project were further thwarted by the publicity attacks from black director Spike Lee who claimed that Jewison was unfit to direct the film "because he was white." Said Lee in a special edition of the rock magazine *Spin*, "I declined a white director (for the film) not on the basis of race, but of culture. White directors are not qualified for the job. The job requires someone who shares the specifics of the culture of black Americans...Let's make a rule: Blacks don't direct Italian films. Italians don't direct Jewish films. Jews don't direct black-American films. That might account for 3 percent of the films that are made in this country. The other 97 percent-let it be every man for himself."⁶

Frustrated with Fuller's script and Lee's repeated attacks on his own credibility to direct the film, Jewison gave up his efforts to film the life of Malcolm X in November of 1990. Jewison passed the

project onto Lee stating, "I don't know how to do this film, I can't lick it."⁷

After Lee received approval from Warner Brothers to direct the film he was faced with the problem of what script to use. Lee chose to use Baldwin and Perl's original script along with Haley's *Autobiography of Malcolm X* as the basis for a script that he would rewrite himself. The section of the script that Lee largely rewrote, was the third act. It focused little attention on the life of Elijah Muhammed, the leader of the Nation of Islam during Malcolm's rise to prominence. According to Lee, Baldwin left out large chunks of Muhammad's role in Malcolm's life. He feared angering the Nation of Islam and Elijah (who was still alive at the time) over portraying some of the controversial events of Elijah's relationship with Malcolm.⁸ However, Lee was not without his own detractors who feared that Lee would film sections of Malcolm's life in a false light. Lee's chief detractor was black nationalist poet Amiri Baraka who had become the chief spokesman for the United Front to Preserve the Legacy of Malcolm X. Said Baraka, "We will not let Malcolm X's life be trashed to make middle-class Negroes sleep easier," and added that Lee was never a part of the struggles of inner-city blacks and that his films in the past had perpetuated negative stereotypes.⁹

Baraka and his group later demanded to examine the content of Lee's script but Lee refused. Said Lee, "Even though Mr. Baraka has appointed himself the grand poo-bah of all blacks, artists don't do that. There are 39 million blacks in this country and I think more of them are on my side than his."¹⁰ In an article in *Newsweek* shortly after, Lee wrote:

Whose Malcolm is it anyway? Malcolm belongs to everyone and everyone is entitled to their own interpretation. African-Americans as diverse as Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas, Minister Louis Farrakhan, Jesse Jackson, and Chuck D of Public Enemy all claim him. I reserve my right as an artist to pursue my own vision of the man.....If my critics really want to help me, and not just tear me down, send me your documents, your research on the importance of Malcolm X. Federal Express your papers, your books, your articles. If you've done work, I will read it.¹¹

Lee's statement summed up the controversy over the life of Malcolm until that point. More knowledge about the private life of Malcolm X was now known, and a new generation of young black people were claiming Malcolm X as a personal hero. Additionally, there were still many Americans who had been closely associated with Malcolm X while he was alive. They too had their own interpretation and their own ideas about how Malcolm X should be represented on film.

"There are various constituencies within the black community that feel as if they own Malcolm X," said Henry Louis Gates Jr., a professor of humanities at Harvard University. "So anybody is going to be attacked who does something with Malcolm they don't agree with."¹² Malcolm's wife Betty Shabazz, who was hired by Lee as a consultant to the film stated, "I think what is happening is that people who really knew Malcolm and who understood the thrust and

importance of his leadership have a right to question anyone who is doing anything on Malcolm." She also added, "Just because Spike Lee is doing a film, doesn't mean he owns Malcolm."¹³

Despite all of the controversy and despite all of his detractors Lee began filming *his* interpretation of the life of Malcolm X in the fall of 1991. Lee's interpretation was based on a 142 page script that he rewrote from the original Baldwin/Perl script, twenty-six years after Malcolm's death, and twenty-three years after Worth had purchased the original film rights for Malcolm's life.

Before filming *Malcolm X*, Lee had produced five other feature films: *She's Gotta Have It*, *School Daze*, *Do The Right Thing*, *Mo' Better Blues*, and *Jungle Fever*. When interviewed about *Malcolm X* later on, Lee repeatedly stated that his five previous films had led to the making of *Malcolm X*.¹⁴ Lee began his career as a filmmaker in the early 1980's when he enrolled in the film program at New York University's Tisch School for the Arts. In 1983, Lee won a student director's academy award presented by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Lee was honored for his 45 minute film, *Joe's Bed-Stuy Barbershop, We Cut Heads*. It was a film about a Brooklyn barber torn between legitimacy and petty crime.

After graduating from film school in 1983, Lee set about putting a film together on a script he had entitled *Messenger*. The film was to be based on a bicycle messenger in New York City who was forced to become head of his household when his mother died of a heart attack. Buoyed by a promise that a friend of the family would raise capital for the movie, Lee hired a crew, cast the film, and even produced *Messenger* t-shirts. The money never came through

and in total, Lee lost around \$50,000 on a film that was never produced.

Nevertheless, Lee's early failure set some precedents for his film career. Lee would learn how to scrimp and scrape by on low budgets, start out with smaller ideas, and learn how to self promote and market his films himself.

Having learned the lesson that he needed to start smaller to make a profit and prove his worth as a filmmaker, Lee wrote a simpler script in the summer of 1985. It included just a few main characters, no sets, comic dialogue, and some sex. The result was *She's Gotta Have It*, a film that was produced on a budget of \$175,000 and brought home a staggering \$8 million at the box office. The film was shot almost entirely on black and white film in just 12 days in an attempt to keep costs down. *She's Gotta Have It* was distributed by Island Pictures, a small production company. The film focuses on Nola Darling, an attractive African-American female who juggles three male suitors at the same time while making her living as a commercial artist. Although the film is predominantly a comedy, Lee does include a little slice of Malcolm X in one particular scene where Nola is painting a mural entitled *May 19th*, after Malcolm's birthday.

Lee himself is cast in the film in the role of one of Nola's suitors, pint-sized Mars Blackmon. Mars' signature is his scat-stuttering style of speech that often comes in the form of "please baby, please baby, please babby, babby, babby, please!" Draped around his neck is a massive gold chain with the name MARS emblazoned on it. He also wears hip high-priced Nike basketball

shoes even while in bed with Nola. As a result, the Mars Blackmon character became a huge hit with audiences and helped further Lee's popularity, particularly with the younger generation of moviegoers.

After seeing Spike's performance as Mars Blackmon in *She's Gotta Have It*, Nike advertising writer Jim Riswold and producer Bill Davenport came up with the idea that Lee would be the perfect conduit to sell their basketball shoes.¹⁵ With Lee an avid sports fan, it wasn't long before Nike had sold Lee on the idea of directing and performing in an ad for Nike as Blackmon with basketball superstar Michael Jordan. With the help of Lee, Nike came up with a new line of shoes called *Air Jordans*. Lee's first commercial with Jordan was entitled *Hang Time* in which Mars ends up hanging on the basketball rim while Jordan slams the ball past a startled Mars and through the rim.

The commercial was a smash hit and helped catapult Nike to the top of the 5.5 billion dollar sneaker industry. What Nike and later Levi's (for whom Spike directed commercials) found out was that Spike was a strong pitchman to the youth market. "Part of what makes him work in the core market we're going after (14-24 years old) is his rebelliousness and candor," said Levi's spokesperson Dan Chew in 1991.¹⁶

Recognizing his own marketability, Lee soon came out with *She's Gotta Have It* T-shirts and a book on the making of the film. Lee would later make T-shirts, buttons, hats, and companion books, for all of his films. According to Lee, there is a distinct purpose behind his self promotion and marketing. "There's a ceiling on how much studios are going to spend on Black films," says Lee. "They're

not going to give me \$49 or \$50 million to promote my films. So each time, I have to get on my drum to get the media out so that my films can compete with the *Batmans*, and the *Terminators*." ¹⁷

Lee produced his second commercial film, *School Daze*, in 1988 and once again it achieved commercial success. Produced on a budget of \$6 million, *School Daze* made a healthy profit at the box office, bringing in over \$14 million in gate receipts for Columbia Pictures.¹⁸ *School Daze* focuses on the conflict over the level of skin pigmentation between rival African-American fraternities and sororities. It takes place within the confines of a fictional all-black college in the South named Mission College. Lee based the script of *School Daze* on his own experiences as an undergraduate student at Morehouse College during the late 1970's.

The issue of skin pigmentation was not a new one for blacks. In his *Autobiography*, Malcolm X spends a great deal of time discussing the controversy. It was one that touched Malcolm's own life. He claimed his father favored him because his skin was lighter than his brothers and sisters but that his mother treated him more harshly because of his lighter shade.¹⁹ Malcolm is mentioned specifically in one scene in *School Daze*. The scene take place when a student tells Dap, an idealistic undergraduate student activist who tends to sermonize, to "yo, ease up Malcolm!" ²⁰

Lee's third commercial film, *Do the Right Thing*, perhaps his most controversial film, increased Lee's popularity. The film also heightened the popularity of Malcolm X and catapulted Lee towards the production of *Malcolm X* three years later.

Distributed by Universal Studios, *Do the Right Thing*, first began to make headlines when it made a strong showing at the 1988 Cannes Film Festival. At the Festival, it just missed winning the prestigious Palm d'Or award. Lee's film was edged out by white director Steven Soderberg's *Sex, Lies, and Videotape*, a fact that left Lee extremely bitter. "I don't think that they're ready for a young black filmmaker to get the Palm d'Or," said an angry Lee after the announcement of the award.²¹ Nevertheless, Lee's complaints and the attention that he received at the festival brought further attention to his film. Produced on a budget of \$6.5 million, *Do the Right Thing* brought in over \$27.5 million for Universal Studios.²²

Part of the success of *Do the Right Thing* was due to the political and racial climate in 1989. According to Lee, the script for *Do the Right Thing* was based on an incident in Howard Beach, Queens. In the incident, three young black men were stranded by car trouble in the neighborhood and attacked by white youths brandishing baseball bats. One of the victims, Michael Griffith, ran in front of a car while trying to escape and was killed.²³

Lee also uses references to Michael Stewart, a young black man who was choked to death by New York City police. The film itself came out only months after the alleged black gang rape of a white female executive in New York City's Central Park. The incident triggered Donald Trump to take out a full-page ad in *The New York Times* calling for the reinstatement of the death penalty.²⁴

Furthermore, the film came out in the midst of the hotly-contested New York City Mayoral Democratic primary between black candidate David Dinkens, and incumbent Ed Koch. Koch's

confrontational style had led to racial tensions in the city.²⁵ Lee told reporters in the summer of 1989 that he he hoped *Do the Right Thing* would ruin Koch's re-election bid.²⁶ Whether or not the film had a direct effect on the results, Koch lost the primary to Dinkens.

The story of *Do the Right Thing* centers on Sal's Famous Pizzeria owned by a white Italian family in an all-black neighborhood in Brooklyn. Starring once again in one of his films, Lee portrays the character of Mookie. He is a young black male with a girlfriend and young son who earns a meager living delivering pizza's for Sal. The crux of the film occurs when a militant black youth named Buggin' Out attempts to boycott the pizzeria because the owner refuses to place pictures of famous African-Americans on his wall. Although Buggin' Out's boycott fails, his attempt to end the pizzeria's business in a black neighborhood later succeeds.

The climax of the film occurs when Sal smashes the blaring "boom-box" of a black youth named Radio Raheem with a baseball bat. Sal's fury is caused by Raheem's refusal to turn off the radio inside the pizza parlor. After the boom-box is smashed, a struggle between Sal and Raheem ensues. The struggle ends when a group of New York City policemen arrive. One overaggressive policeman chokes Raheem to death with a billy-club. In response, a growing mob gathers outside the pizza parlor. As Mookie throws a garbage can through a window of the pizzeria, the mob storms in, burning the pizza parlor down in veangance of Raheem's death.

What further incited media critics, however, was the close of Lee's film. It ends with two quotes, the first from Martin Luther King Jr.: "Violence as a way of achieving racial justice is both

impractical and immoral.....Violence ends by defeating itself. It creates bitterness in the survivors and brutality in the destroyers." The second quote came from Malcolm X's famous "Ballot or the Bullet" speech which ends with the statement: "I am not using violence in self-defense. I don't even call it violence when it's self-defense. I call it intelligence." Writers such as Joe Klein and David Denby of *New York Magazine* and Jack Kroll of *Newsweek* reacted viciously to Lee's film, predicting that the ending of *Do the Right Thing*, would incite riots all over the country.

Despite critics' fears, the film did not cause any riots. However, it did fuel a new popularity for Malcolm X, and Lee's drive to film a movie on Malcolm's life. Said Lee after he had completed the filming of *Malcolm X*, "I started thinking about making a film about *Malcolm X* right after I made *Do the Right Thing*. I read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*-the most important book I'll ever read-when I was in junior high school. I began to look at the world with a new set of eyes. It showed me how we are portrayed in the media, how African-Americans star in sport, and show business smile and say all the right things, but never speak out, and how it all ties in."²⁷ Immediately after *Do the Right Thing* had been released, Lee began producing shirts, hats, and other memorabilia with the "X" insignia to begin his self promotion to produce the film.

In his next two commercial films, Lee once again used pieces that he would later use in his film on Malcolm X. In his fourth film, *Mo' Better Blues*, Lee used actor Denzel Washington in the lead role of a trumpet player in an African-American blues and jazz band. Washington would later become Lee's choice to portray Malcolm.

In his fifth commercial film, *Jungle Fever*, Lee focused the story on interracial romance, a theme that was a large part of Malcolm's early "gangster" years when he was involved with a white woman named Sophia.

Both *Mo' Better Blues*, and *Jungle Fever* were profitable for Lee at the box office. Produced on a budget under \$10 million, *Mo' Better Blues* brought in a somewhat disappointing \$16 million at the box office for Universal Studios. Lee rebounded with *Jungle Fever* which was produced on a budget of around \$14 million dollars and tallied over \$32.5 million at the box office for Universal Studios.²⁸

With successful movies behind him Lee was prepared to film the biggest project of his film career. Said Lee, "I knew it (a film on the life of Malcolm X) had to be done by an African-American director, and not just any African-American director, either, but one to whom the life of Malcolm spoke very directly. And Malcolm has always been my man. I felt everything I'd done in life up to now had prepared me for this moment. I was down for it all the way."²⁹ In short, Lee was a big fan and follower of Malcolm X in addition to being interested in making a film about the life of an historical figure.

Lee was also recruited to write the introduction for Clayton Carson's new book entitled, *Malcolm X: the FBI Files*. It appeared at the same time that Lee was to begin filming. In the introduction, Lee continued to create attention about Malcolm X, offering his own hypothesis on how and why Malcolm was assassinated.

Although Lee was encouraged and driven by his mission to make a film on the life of one of his hero's, Warner Brothers was

motivated strictly by financial considerations. In 1991, sixteen African-American produced films had been released by Hollywood. Besides Lee's *Jungle Fever*, Mario Van Peeble's *New Jack City* and John Singleton's *Boyz n' the Hood* had been huge money makers for their parent Hollywood companies. *New Jack City*, produced on a budget of \$15 million, had reaped in over \$50 million at the box office. *Boyz n' the Hood*, produced on a budget of \$7 million, brought in an astounding \$57 million.³⁰

Warner Brothers was hoping to duplicate the summer of 1991 by signing a producer like Lee, who had been able to bring in high profits off of low budget films. They were hoping that Lee could do the same with a film on the life of Malcolm X. "The only reason Warner Brothers is making this film now, is that they see all these kids with these Malcolm X hats on, they see all these rappers with Malcolm X included in their lyrics, they can smell a dollar better than anybody," said Lee in an interview on the PBS arts program "Edge."³¹ However, Lee had different visions for his project, and conflicts over the film project were destined to occur.

Lee had originally budgeted *Malcolm X* at around 33-34 million dollars. Lee had planned that his film would be more than three hours long. Warner Brothers countered with a budget of 18-20 million dollars. They envisioned that the film would be a little over two hours long. Lee was able to sell the foreign film rights to Larry Gordon, a European investor, for eight million dollars. That gave Lee a 26 million dollar budget to do a film that he had pegged at 33-34 million dollars. Lee accused Warner Brothers of exploiting him, writing in his production book: "That plantation mentality. I'm

starting to look for Harriet Tubman to come and rescue me. Harriet, where are you?!"³²

Despite working with a reduced budget, Lee began shooting the film in the fall of 1991 without slashing any dialogue or scenes from the script. By December of 1991, Lee had completed the principal shooting of the film in the United States. However, he still had scenes from Malcolm's pilgrimage to Mecca to shoot as well as postproduction to complete. Lee was close to going over budget at this time so the company insuring the film, was forced to step in and finance Lee's over budget effort.

The Completion Bond Company attempted to take over the remaining production, asking Lee to cut portions of the film in order to save money. Lee refused the efforts of the Bond Company to take control over his film. Despite the Bond Company's objections, Lee flew to South Africa to shoot the final scenes that would include South African leader Nelson Mandela.

The bond company, which had dumped in five million dollars of its own, retaliated by demanding that Lee produce a rough cut of the film by February 29 of 1992. That was far ahead of the schedule Lee had planned³³. Furthermore, Lee was asking for an additional 1.3 million dollars in funding to complete the film. Neither Warner Brothers or the Completion Bond Company was willing to provide the extra money. When Lee failed to deliver a rough cut by the deadline, the Completion Bond Company pulled all of its funding from the film, and laid off all of Lee's film editors and postproduction assistants until "further notice."³⁴

Without any funding and the future of his film in doubt, Lee was forced to scramble. He came up with the funding by asking for and receiving donations from several black entertainers including Bill Cosby, Michael Jordan, Janet Jackson, Oprah Winfrey, and Magic Johnson. Said Lee, "Here was a group, *A Who's Who*, all African-Americans, all have much bank (money) and all gave their money. These folks saved *Malcolm X*. It was their money that kept us to continue to work on the film."³⁵ Lee's new source of funding allowed him to continue to work for two months until Warner Brothers and the Completion Bond Company had worked out the final financial terms for the film.

Lee's first cut of the film was 3 hours and 50 minutes long. It was generally accepted by Warner Brothers when presented to the studio executives of Warner Brothers on March 28. Later that spring, while Lee was completing the final editing on *Malcolm X*, riots and subsequent fires broke out in predominantly all black South-Central Los Angeles and in other cities all over the United States. The riots came as a direct result of a Simi Valley, California, jury acquitting four white Los Angeles police officers in the beating of a black man named Rodney King on April 28, 1993.

When Lee gave a second screening of a slimmed down 3 hour and 18 minute *Malcolm X* to Warner Brothers on May 4, Los Angeles, was still smouldering from the violence that had occurred just days before. Said Lee, "I got up in front of everybody and said, 'this film is needed now, more than ever.'"³⁶

In Lee's final cut, he added the amateur black and white video footage taken of the Rodney King beating while laying a soundtrack

of Malcolm X's fiery rhetoric underneath the visual imagery. Like his previous film, *Do the Right Thing*, *Malcolm X* was produced and released amid a heated and controversial political context that added momentum. Furthermore, by producing *Malcolm X* against the background of the Rodney King riots, he was able to link the racial themes of Malcolm X's day, to the racial themes of the 1990's.

Despite some obstacles along the way, Lee was also able to retain final control over his film. As a result, Lee was able to complete the final cut in the way that *he* saw Malcolm X, and the way *he* wanted the film to be produced.

In his praise of Denzel Washington's performance as Malcolm X in the film Lee expanded on how *he* wanted to represent Malcolm X in the movie. Said Lee, "I really think he (Washington) captured the complexity of Malcolm X. The real man. Not bullshit myth like throwing a dollar across the Potomac or chopping down a cherry tree or making heroes larger than life. We want to do that, but realistically. That is needed for our (African-Americans) people. Our people need and deserve it."³⁷

But who was Malcolm X and who was the "real man?" There are many interpretations and supporting myths about the life of Malcolm X. Spike Lee's interpretation is only one of many. In order to critique what Lee says *about* the life of Malcolm X, it is important to study how Lee uses *myth* in his film *realistically*. Therefore, a cultural and historical perspective on the life of Malcolm X must be examined.

¹ Anne Thompson. "Malcolm, Let's Do Lunch," *Mother Jones*, July/Aug. 1991: 27.

- 2 Ibid., p. 28.
- 3 Ibid., p. 28.
- 4 Ibid., p. 28.
- 5 Ibid., p. 29.
- 6 Ibid., p. 57.
- 7 Spike Lee and Ralph Wiley, *By Any Means Necessary: The Trials and Tribulations of the Making of Malcolm X* (New York: Hyperion, 1992), 10.
- 8 Ibid., p. 25.
- 9 Evelyn Nieves. "Malcolm X: Firestorm Over a Film Script," *The New York Times*. 9 Aug. 1991: B1.
- 10 Ibid., p. B2.
- 11 Spike Lee. "The Director Takes on His Detractors," *Newsweek* 29 Aug. 1991: 53.
- 12 Nieves, B1.
- 13 Ibid., p. B2.
- 14 Lisa Kennedy. "Is Malcolm X the Right Thing?" *Sight and Sound* 3:2 Feb. 1993: 7.
- 15 Rick Reilly. "He's Gotta Pitch It," *Sports Illustrated* 24 May, 1991, 77.
- 16 Ibid., p. 83.
- 17 Charles Whitaker. "Doing the Spike Thing," *Ebony* Nov. 1991, 88.
- 18 Figures as released by Columbia Pictures.
- 19 Alex Haley. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Ballantine Books/Grove Press, 1965), 4.
- 20 Lisa Kennedy, 6.
- 21 Marlaine Glicksman. "Spike Lee's Bed-Stuy BBQ," *Film Commentary* July/Aug. 1989: 18.
- 22 Figures released by Universal Studios.
- 23 Terrance Raftery. "The Current Cinema, Open and Shut," *The New Yorker*
- 24 Jly, 1989, 80.
- 24 Glicksman, 12.
- 25 Reilly, 84.
- 26 Ibid., p. 84.
- 27 James Veniere. "Doing the Job," *Sight and Sound* 3:2 Feb. 1993: 10.
- 28 Box office figures as released by Universal Studios.
- 29 Lee and Wiley, 2.
- 30 Box office figures released by *Variety* magazine.
- 31 Hazel Carby. "Imagining Black Men: The Politics of Cultural Identity," *Yale Review* 80:2 Jly 1992: 187.
- 32 Lee and Wiley, 31-32.
- 33 Ibid., p. 136.
- 34 Ibid., p. 136.
- 35 Ibid., p. 166.
- 36 Ibid., p. 160.
- 37 Ibid., p. 136.

Chapter 3. Malcolm X: A Historical and Cultural Perspective

Part of the controversy over Spike Lee's production of *Malcolm X*, was due to the concerns of followers of Malcolm X who feared Lee's historical interpretation of Malcolm's life. Besides *The Autobiography*, a number of books and articles have been written in an attempt to interpret Malcolm's life in its historical context. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to examine every book and every article written on Malcolm X. However, I wish to examine a few particular authors, books, and articles that focus on key aspects of Malcolm's life. In addition, I will examine events of his life that Lee deals with or fails to deal with in his film to critique Lee's film within a proper historical context. To do so, I will focus on sections of Malcolm's earlier days. However, I will focus particularly on Malcolm's life after his conversion to Islam in prison to keep this thesis within a manageable framework.

The Autobiography:

Perhaps the most noted historical source on the life of Malcolm X is Alex Haley's *Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Published shortly after Malcolm's death, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, is based on a number of personal interviews that Malcolm gave Haley over a six year period, beginning in 1963. Haley's book portrays Malcolm as a man who fell victim to drugs, prostitution, and gambling as a young man. However, Malcolm was able to pull himself up out of his hopeless situation through self education and the teachings of Black

Muslim leader Elijah Muhammad. Malcolm then used his knowledge and education to become a national spokesperson for African-Americans.

Haley's book also portrays how Malcolm eventually rejected the racist Black Muslim doctrine that all white people "were devils" after his journey to Mecca in 1964. During his pilgrimage, Malcolm worshipped with fellow Muslims who were white. After Malcolm's death in 1965, thousands of copies of *The Autobiography* were sold and they continue to sell briskly today. There are those, such as Arnold Rampersad, who believe that the popularity of *The Autobiography* is due to the dramatic "Saul to Paul" conversion story that Haley's book portrays.

According to Rampersad, *The Autobiography* works as a spiritual text using "the story of a sinner who, finding God, transforms his life in this way and writes the autobiography as a guide that may lead other sinners to God."¹

Nevertheless, the "spiritual text" of the *Autobiography* is believed to contain more myths than facts and hides a great deal of information that Malcolm wanted hidden. For example, *The Autobiography* makes little mention of Malcolm's first trip to Africa in 1959 when he visited Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the Sudan, Nigeria, and Ghana, in order to gain political alliances for the Nation of Islam.

During his first trip to Africa, Malcolm X likely met many white muslims, but did not experience the same spiritual change that he experienced during his second visit to Africa in 1964.² In 1959, Malcolm was fully committed to the Black Muslim stance that all white people "were devils." As a result, Malcolm likely viewed the

white muslims in Africa he encountered as "devils" as well. By 1964, Malcolm had separated from the Black Muslims and his stance toward white people had become less radical. Consequently, he was able to see the white muslims he encountered in a different light. If Malcolm had mentioned his 1959 trip to Africa in his autobiography, his conversion during his 1964 trip would not have come across as profound or dramatic as he portrayed it to be.

Concerning the earlier years of Malcolm's life, there are doubts that he was as big a hustler and criminal as he claimed to be. "My observations from the records I've seen and in talking to people is that Malcolm was not the big-time hustler he was made out to be by Alex Haley's book. He hustled, but everybody hustled one way or another because it was about trying to survive. I think the book was heavily dramatized," wrote Lee in his production book for his film on Malcolm's life.³ Despite claims that *The Autobiography* is more myth than fact, Lee proceeded to use Haley's book as a foundation for his film on the life of Malcolm X in order to sustain the dramatic narrative flow of Malcolm's life.

Part of the problem of the historical content in the *Autobiography*, is the fractured construction of Haley's book. Malcolm's life changed direction during the writing of the book in 1963 and 1964, but the book doesn't keep up. At Haley's insistence, Malcolm agreed not to revise the sections of the book written before his visit to Mecca in 1964.⁴

Rather than retelling the story as a struggle toward a coherent Black ideology, *The Autobiography* contains sections of Malcolm's rhetoric written from his perspective as a radical nationalist for the

Nation of Islam. It also includes sections of Malcolm's rhetoric during his last years where he had no clear ideology, but was working toward a greater understanding between blacks and whites.

Consequently, many of Malcolm's followers have taken different sections of his life from *The Autobiography* and formed different understandings of Malcolm on their own terms. Writes Arnold Rampersad:

What these admirers "see" in Malcolm's legacy is what, more or less what he has become. In the process, the truth of his life, insofar as we can gage the truth about an individual is more or less immaterial. Malcolm has become the desires of his admirers, who have reshaped memory, historical record, and *The Autobiography* according to their wishes, which is to recover parts of history according to their needs as they perceive them.⁵

Rampersad's point can be evidenced in the needs of many young blacks of the current generation to view Malcolm as a black militant hero. "For blacks, Malcolm is a hero in the same way White America would look to Elvis, John Wayne, or George Washington," says Chuck D, the lead rapper for the hard edged rap group Public Enemy.⁶ Public Enemy's rap single "Fight the Power" was one of the driving forces and theme songs behind Lee's film, *Do the Right Thing*.

"Young blacks love Malcolm X almost to the point of uncritical adoration," says James Cone, professor of Systematic Theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York and author of *Martin and*

Malcolm and America: A Dream or a Nightmare. "He (Malcolm) expresses the anger they feel about White America and about the Black leadership establishment," continues Cone. "That is why Malcolm is so popular among rap artists and street-preachers and why his image and sayings adorn buttons, caps, and T-shirts."⁷

But to other critics, scholars, and Malcolm X followers, the present popularity of Malcolm X among young blacks, represents only a small part and a small piece of who he really was. Because of the complexities of Malcolm's life, it is extremely difficult for anyone to pinpoint Malcolm down to a single meaning or purpose. "He was a complex person-constantly growing, disavowing old views and affirming new ones," says Cone. "His meaning therefore, cannot be reduced to the political rhetoric of any group."⁸

Even those who lived during Malcolm's time and knew him personally, have difficulty describing who he really was and what he ultimately stood for before his assassination. It is difficult for them to describe Malcolm X because he veiled many of his personal values and beliefs within himself. "It's difficult to look with accuracy behind somebody else's veil," says C. Eric Lincoln, professor of religion and culture at Duke University, whose 1961 book, *The Black Muslims of America*, provided many with their first indepth view of Malcolm X. "Though Malcolm X and I spent a lot of time together, he was still a veiled figure."⁹

Another difficulty for scholars and critics, was that Malcolm was killed in a period when he was transforming his personal and philosophical movement away from the Nation of Islam. "Malcolm was a person who was still working out who he was at the time of his

death," says Vincent Harding, a professor of religion and social transformation at the Iliff School of Theology in Denver. "He was still looking for the next step and wrestling with this central question of how to empower the poor."¹⁰

Bruce Perry's Biography:

One biographer who has recently attempted to unveil the true Malcolm, and what he really stood for, is Bruce Perry. Perry's biography of Malcolm X, *Malcolm: The Life of a Man Who Changed Black America*, published in 1991, has drawn criticism and created controversy from scholars opposed to his research style. Through hundreds of interviews with close associates, friends, and family members, along with numerous documents and written records, Perry attempts to trace Malcolm's life, bit by bit and fact by fact. Perry fits the many pieces of Malcolm's life into his own psychoanalytic puzzle. The thesis of Perry's puzzle is based on the theory that Malcolm's entire life was shaped by the favoritism given to members of his family during his childhood depending on their level of skin color.

In his book, Perry reveals a number of striking assertions. Among them, Perry asserts that Malcolm engaged in homosexual acts during his days as an adolescent and as a street hustler. Perry also theorizes that his father burned down the family house in Lansing, Michigan, and was not murdered by white supremacists as Malcolm contended. Furthermore, he states that in 1961, while a member of the Nation of Islam, Malcolm met secretly with members of the Ku Klux Klan to discuss the possibility of a separate Black state within

the United States, and supposedly like his father, Malcolm firebombed his own home. Perry spends a majority of his book, picking apart the myths and details of Haley's *Autobiography*. However, Perry uses sections of *The Autobiography* to verify his own accounts and assertions throughout his book, among them that Malcolm was a victim of his own light skin color throughout his life. Among Perry's critics is Spike Lee, himself, who stated:

I don't buy this Bruce Perry bullshit that Malcolm was a homosexual, that he used to cross-dress, or that Malcolm's father burned down their house in Omaha or that Malcolm fire-bombed his own house in Queens. That's bullshit! He did a lot of research, and some of the interviews were good, but Bruce Perry's book reads like *The National Inquirer*.¹¹

Other critics view Perry's factual assertions as being taken out of context and used to forward Perry's own premises. "Perry is satisfied with grabbing a piece of Malcolm and pinning it on his wall like a trophy, the stuffed head glorifying the hunter. Perry neither acknowledges nor dreams the basic human connection between Malcolm and himself, except as one-way traffic that verifies Perry's authority, Perry's prerogatives, Malcolm's failure or success in living up to standards Perry concocts and imposes," writes John Edgar Wideman.¹²

In contrast, Haley's *Autobiography* perhaps omits some embarrassing facts along the way, but in the process, serves the

larger picture and theme of Malcolm's life by placing the narrative within a proper context according to Arnold Rampersad who writes:

In his *Autobiography* and elsewhere, Malcolm acknowledged this legacy of confusion and shame and sought to cover it. He did so, I believe, for perfectly sound reasons. His primary purpose in writing his book was not to dwell on his misfortunes but to emphasize how he overcame them, and thus how others could and must overcome them. Thus political purposefulness tends to override the role and power of accurate memory in narrative, which is to say that the text of *The Autobiography* is not sacred in its details but must be studied as an arena where effects are being created to enhance the political and spiritual power of the book. Indeed, the very opening of *The Autobiography* is thus affected-or contaminated.¹³

It must be said that certain key facts, stories, and accounts must be examined against some measuring stick of accuracy and should not be quickly glossed over and taken lightly. For if particular characters and events are grossly misrepresented, are not the larger themes of the text of Haley's narrative and later Lee's narrative directly affected? For example, Malcolm contends in his *Autobiography* that his father was murdered by white supremacists and that their house in Lansing (not Omaha as Spike Lee contends) was burned to the ground by a white supremacist group and that his grandmother was "raped" by her white slaveowner. Malcolm later

used these examples throughout his ministry in the Nation of Islam as fuel to spread the larger theme that all white people were "devils" and "racists."

If these examples that Malcolm used throughout his ministry in the Nation of Islam and in *The Autobiography* are unfounded, then his assertion that all whites are "devils" and "racists" is severely weakened. In other words, for the larger *extrinsic* themes to be examined in a text about the life of Malcolm X, the smaller *intrinsic* accounts, facts, and assertions must be examined as well. Consequently, a book such as Perry's biography should be examined closely.

In his book, Perry states that Malcolm's "moral, intellectual, and emotional growth was a triumphant victory over the ravages of a childhood that, until now, has been enshrouded in fiction and myth."¹⁴ Early in *The Autobiography* Malcolm asserts that his grandmother was raped by her Scottish slavemaster and that his mother was conceived out of this rape. "I learned to hate every drop of the white rapist's blood that is in me," says Malcolm.¹⁵

Malcolm's mother, born on the island of Grenada, was the last of three illegitimate children of a woman who died giving birth to her. Malcolm's mother was fathered by her mother's Scottish slavemaster, but in actually there is no evidence or proof that a rape ever occurred.

The Earlier Years:

Perry paints Malcolm's father as a man who was unreliable and a hustler himself. After moving into a Lansing, Michigan, farmhouse

in 1929, the Little family was notified that the deed to their home contained a clause stipulating that "This land shall never be rented, leased, sold to, or occupied by persons other than those of the Caucasian race."¹⁶ Shortly after, the Littles were given an eviction notice from the State of Michigan denying the Little family any reimbursement.

Earl Little, Malcolm's father, was furious and gave notice that he intended to appeal to the Supreme Court of Michigan. A few weeks later, in the early morning hours of November 7, the farmhouse started on fire. The Little family escaped safely, but most of the farmhouse was lost as Earl Little refused to let anyone try to rescue furniture or other parts of the house saying "Let it burn."¹⁷ The Lansing fire department was contacted but its firefighters refused to come because the Little house lay outside the Lansing city limits. According to Malcolm's version in *The Autobiography*, "The white police and firemen came and stood around watching as the house burned to the ground."¹⁸

Earl Little told the police that white supremacists had started the fire in an attempt to force the Little family to leave but the police were skeptical because the courts had already ordered the family to leave. A later examination of the charred ruins disclosed the presence of a two gallon oil can.¹⁹ Louise Little, Malcolm's mother, testified that she had poured some of the fuel into a gas stove and then placed the oil can behind the kitchen door. But the fire marshal found the oil can in the basement, beneath a set of bedsprings. The fire marshal determined that it could not have fallen there during the fire, because there was no cellar beneath the kitchen.²⁰ The

police later suspected that Earl Little himself had moved the oil can downstairs just before the fire and had set the fire himself. The motive was based on the idea that if he could not have the house, then nobody would have it. Nevertheless, the suspicion of arson by Earl Little was later dropped and never proven.

Earl Little came from a family that appeared to live by self-destructive violence. Three of Earl's six brothers died violently and another barely escaped a violent death. Earl's brother Herbert committed suicide. Another brother, Oscar, was shot to death by Pittsburgh police for wounding a white policeman who had attempted to arrest him for allegedly threatening some people with a pistol. John, the third of Earl's six brothers, was shotgunned to death as a result of a quarrel with another man. James, a moonshiner, was shot by a woman who he had assaulted. He survived the incident.²¹

Earl later died a violent death when he was fatally hit and partially run over by a street car in Lansing. Malcolm asserted throughout his life that his father's death was a result of foul play from a white supremacist group called the Black Legion. He claimed members of the group bashed in his father's skull and then laid him across the tracks where he was run over by the street car. Malcolm's belief was the result of his mother's theory which she related to her children after their father's death. However, according to the police report issued by Trooper Baril, the officer at the scene, Earl Little was able to speak to Baril before he was taken to the hospital. According to Baril's report, Earl Little told Baril that he had tried to board a moving street car but had missed the steps and fallen underneath the rear wheels.²²

Baril contended that Little's skull had not been crushed. "If it had been," said Baril, "Mr. Little would not have been able to explain how the injury had occurred."²³ As for a possible murder by the Black Legion, police records, newspaper accounts, and recollections of black contemporaries of Earl Little show considerable doubt about whether or not the black-robed members of the Black Legion ever operated in the Lansing area.²⁴ The state police report, the coroner's report, and the death certificate all indicate that the death was accidental.

Malcolm's father had held two life insurance policies before his death. The smaller insurance company of the two policies paid off. The second company balked at paying off its policy because it claimed Earl had committed suicide. Nevertheless, a number of members of the black community contributed financially to the Little family.

Throughout the remainder of Malcolm's life, other members of his family played key roles. Malcolm's half-sister, Ella, one of Earl's daughters from a previous marriage, was a major influence on Malcolm's life. After living in poverty and being shuttled from one boarding home to another, Malcolm went to live with Ella in Boston. There, he was sucked into a life of street hustling and crime. After Malcolm converted to the Nation of Islam, Ella converted to the Nation of Islam as well. When Malcolm broke with the Nation of Islam, Ella financed many of Malcolm's ventures, including his pilgrimage to Mecca in 1964. After his death in 1965, Ella pledged to take over and direct Malcolm's fledgling organization, the O.A.A.U. (Organization for African American Unity,) but her efforts died

shortly afterward. According to Perry's description, Ella was a domineering mother figure for Malcolm. She was also a shrewd businessperson, accumulating much of her wealth through sometimes "shady" real estate deals in Boston.

Malcolm's brothers also played large roles in Malcolm's life. Malcolm's older brothers, Wilfred and Philbert, became members of the Nation of Islam as did Malcolm's younger brother Reginald. Reginald first introduced Malcolm to the Nation of Islam while he was in prison, and later played a key part in his conversion to the the Nation of Islam and the teachings of Elijah Muhammad.

Black Muslim Theology:

The theology of the Black Muslims was an interesting, if not amazing description of the creation of the universe that Malcolm described thoroughly in *the Autobiography*, but which Lee cut entirely from his film. The head of the Nation of Islam who passed down the theology and beliefs of the Black Muslims to Malcolm when he joined its ranks in 1953, was Elijah Muhammad. Originally born Robert Poole, Elijah Muhammad was the son of a sharecropper around the turn of the century, in the state of Georgia. According to Elijah Muhammad's teachings, "Allah" revealed himself to the black people of Detroit in 1930 in the form of a tiny Asiatic man named W.D. Fard or Wallace D. Fard.

Fard claimed that he came from Mecca and that he was the Hidden Imman. According to Fard, he was the first among twenty-four black scientists who managed Allah's creation.²⁵ Fard was well-versed in the Bible and the Holy Qur'an and he was an expert in

history, mathematics, and astronomy. He began to go door to door with his teachings, creating a small following in the process. Not long after, Poole became his chief follower and Fard renamed Poole Elijah Muhammad.

Fard taught Muhammed that the God who created the universe was a black man and all creation came from a black idea. The Adam of the Bible was not the first man, but the first white man and the first devil. According to Fard, God created the first men black in his own image, 66 or 72 trillion years ago and entrusted control of the universe to twenty-four of them known as Imams, or scientists.²⁶ Farrad also taught Muhammad that Mars was peopled with "skinny" men seven to nine feet tall who were also under the dominion of the creator.

One of the twenty-four scientists named Yacub, known as "the big head scientist" went "mad" and rebelled against the creator. He created a weaker "devil" race of white men after he was exiled to the island of Patmos. Over an 800 year period, Yacub created the white "devil" race through the means of genocidal culling. According to the Black Muslim theology, he inserted needles into the brains of unsuitably darker infants that progressed from a black race, to a brown, a red, a yellow, and at last, a blue-eyed devil race which wound up in the caves of Europe.²⁷ The new white devil race was granted dominion over the world for 6,000 years down to our time where they began to enslave and rule over the black race.

W.D. Fard also taught Elijah Muhammad that at the end of time a giant "mother plane" or "mother ship" in the shape of a great wheel, the size of a half-mile by a half-mile, would descend on Earth and

release fifteen hundred baby ships. These ships would then release bombs that would burrow a mile deep in the earth and explode with enough force to raise mountains a mile high. Each of the bombs would give off poison gas that would kill and destroy anything within a fifty mile range. The atmosphere would burn for 310 years and take another 690 years to cool off. At the end of the thousand years, the children of the Original People would be brought back to witness the destruction and the purification of the Earth.²⁸

All of this theology was at the basis of the Black Muslim religion and it was passed on from Fard, to Muhammed, to Malcolm X. Malcolm preached and believed the doctrine quite literally during his time in the Nation of Islam. After spending four years in Detroit, Fard mysteriously disappeared, allowing Elijah Muhammad to take control and leadership over the Nation of Islam. Some believed that Fard returned to Mecca while others believed that Elijah Muhammad disposed of Fard himself in order to take over power.

The Johnson Hinton Incident:

After being released from prison in 1952, Malcolm joined the Nation of Islam and became the Nation's chief recruiter. At the time, the Nation of Islam consisted of approximately 4,000 members. By the time he left the Nation in 1963, the membership total had reached 40,000 members. Malcolm began to demonstrate just how powerful the Nation of Islam had become in April of 1957 with an incident in Harlem, New York. A black drunkard who had been abusing his female companion was stopped by a white police officer. According to the police department, the drunk bit the officer, ran

him into a wall, and fastened a bear hug on him.²⁹ A second policeman intervened but was not able to subdue the powerfully-built black man until they had pummeled him, leaving his head and clothing covered with blood.

In the meantime, an angry crowd had gathered and a Black Muslim bystander named Johnson Hinton rebuked the officers. According to Hinton's later testimony, as he was leaving the scene, an officer grabbed him from behind and smashed him in the head with his billy club. Hinton also testified that as the billy club descended on his head, he was able to partially grab ahold of it. The officer in question disputed Hinton's testimony and claimed that he had accidentally backed into Hinton after subduing the drunkard and that Hinton had seized his nightstick. The policeman and Hinton struggled for control of the nightstick as several other patrolmen rushed to the scene. According to the testimony of another officer, Hinton grabbed him by the throat and started choking him. Other officers joined the fray and clubbed Hinton to the ground.³⁰

Bleeding and handcuffed, Hinton was taken to the Twenty-eighth Precinct Station House where he later testified that he was beaten again and eventually blacked out. Less than a half hour after the incident originally occurred, Harlem's Temple Number Seven, of which Malcolm was the Minister, was notified. Malcolm organized a contingent of Muslims who appeared outside the police station. Malcolm entered the building and asked to see Hinton. At first he was told that Hinton wasn't there, and then he was told that he was there but that he couldn't see him. Malcolm replied that until he saw

Hinton, the crowd outside which at this time had swelled to hundreds and then thousands, would remain.

Fearing a potential riot, the police contacted a number of influential citizens, including James Hicks, the editor of the *Amsterdam News*, the city's most influential black newspaper.³¹ The police asked Hicks to meet with Malcolm in an attempt to reach a peaceful solution. After a heated discussion with Deputy Police Commissioner Walter Arn, Malcolm was promised access to Hinton and that Hinton would be transported to a hospital if he needed further treatment. After seeing Hinton nearly unconscious, Malcolm arranged for him to be rushed to a Harlem Hospital by ambulance. The crowd followed on foot and continued to grow.

Continuing to fear a riot, the police asked Malcolm to disperse the throng. Malcolm agreed on the condition that Hinton would continue to receive medical care and that the police officers who beat Hinton would be punished. After being promised these things, Malcolm strode to the door of the police station, silently stood there, and motioned with his arm for the crowd to disperse. They promptly did.³² Said Inspector McGowan, the detective on the scene to one policeman, "Did you see what I just saw?", whereupon the officer replied, "Yeah, this is too much power for one man to have." Said McGowan later on, "He meant one black man. I'll never forget that."³³

Corruption in the Nation of Islam:

Although the Nation of Islam exerted power and influence over many black men and women, it was also corrupt, something that

Malcolm was often oblivious to. Malcolm repeatedly offered his adoration to the "honorable Elijah Muhammad" in his speeches and statements but in reality, Muhammad's Nation of Islam was a highly driven money making machine that drained as many dollars from its constituents as possible.

In his earlier involvement with the Nation of Islam, Malcolm initiated the Nation's own newspaper, *Muhammad Speaks*. As the Nation of Islam continued to grow, members were encouraged and then required to sell quotas of the Nation's newspaper. Any newspaper that they were not able to sell had to be paid for out of their own pockets. At one point the "circulation" of the newspaper reached 900,000 and its gross income surpassed \$100,000 a week.³⁴ Members were discouraged from reading anything but *Muhammad Speaks* and other publications of Elijah Muhammad, all of which they had to pay for. "All you have to do is listen to what I say," Elijah declared. "I have the ABSOLUTE CURE for all your problems and ailments."³⁵

At the mass rallies that were advertised as free, gallon-sized buckets were passed around the hall. As soon as the buckets were emptied, they were passed down the aisles again. During one particular rally, National Secretary John 4X, later known as John Ali, dipped his hand into a suitcase full of money brought to the front of the speaker's podium and exclaimed "We haven't got enough yet! Dig down into your socks!" The buckets were then passed around six times that afternoon.³⁶

Meanwhile, Elijah and the other heads of the Nation of Islam lived in relative splendor off the collections. After he assumed the

position of National Secretary, John 4X was provided a new car, a home of his own, and well-tailored suits. He attributed his prosperity to his "thrifty nature."³⁷ Still, allegations of corruption among the Nation of Islam, specifically among Elijah Muhammad's family, continued to exist. Former Nation of Islam official Aubrey Barnette wrote in one article of the *Saturday Evening Post*, entitled: "The Black Muslims are a fraud," that each Muslim sister had to buy at least three ankle-length Muslim gowns in order to attend obligatory social functions. Each gown cost around two hundred dollars and the shop that made the gowns was owned by one of Elijah Muhammad's daughters.³⁸

The Muhammad family also ran a number of other businesses including a clothing store, a combination grocery-restaurant, a barber shop, and several bakeries. With Malcolm preaching that black people should keep their business within the black community, Elijah's business holdings thrived. Furthermore, the Nation kept its financial affairs clandestine and was often ambiguous as to who owned what in the movement, allowing the Nation to often skirt the Internal Revenue Service with its profits.

Nevertheless, Malcolm glazed over the corruption of the Nation with a blind faith that all was well with Elijah Muhammad's dealings and that "the good messenger would take care of him." At one point the Nation offered to give Malcolm the deed to the home they had provided for him and his family to live in. Malcolm refused its offer. As long as Malcolm continued to keep the popularity of the Nation of Islam high, the profits continued to roll in. "Malcolm had become a money-maker," says Charles Kenyatta, one of Malcolm's followers

who at that time, was known as Charles 37X. "He had taken them out of the wilderness and taken them into the Promised Land, where all of a sudden they were being looked on as a very powerful organization."³⁹

As Malcolm's popularity grew, especially with the media, some jealousies began to surface within the Nation of Islam. Part of the fascination of the media with Malcolm, was his ability to give clever sound-bites. "He knew how to do sound-bites before any civilians knew what sound-bites were and his use of them was always saying something outrageous and there was always someone sticking a microphone in front of him saying 'say something outrageous'," said Peter Goldman, one of his biographers.⁴⁰ But to some, Malcolm's personal fascination with the media was part of his downfall. "He got drunk off of it," said Kenyatta. "He used to sit by the TV set and watch himself, and you could see how much he liked it."⁴¹ "I knew he was on a collision course," said Yusaf Shah, the lieutenant of the Nation's security force, known as The Fruit of Islam at the time. "The media, the cameras, the lights, it was a narcotic. He loved them! He not only liked them, he loved them....he revered them!"⁴²

Shah was among a number of Malcolm's enemies who were suspected of being involved in the plot to assassinate Malcolm X after Malcolm's break with the Nation of Islam in 1963. Malcolm began revealing to the press that Elijah Muhammad had fathered a number of illegitimate children with some of his personal secretaries. Malcolm told Shah that the Nation of Islam was in trouble. "He told me that the nation was finished," said Shah. "I told him 'no, no, no.

We're not finished. That's when he really got upset because he didn't like people to talk back to him."⁴³

The Burning of Malcolm's House:

After he broke with the Nation of Islam, the Nation attempted to take back the house that Malcolm and his family were living in the "minister's parsonage." In June of 1964, the case went to trial and three months later, the Nation of Islam was awarded ownership of the house. The judge presiding over the case ruled that Malcolm and his family would have to vacate the house. With the aid of his lawyers, Malcolm was able to postpone the eviction date until January 31, of the following year. Despite the ruling, Malcolm and his family continued to live in the house into the month of February. The Nation of Islam's lawyers issued another petition to have Malcolm and his family evicted and Judge Wahl, the judge presiding over the case, ordered another hearing on February 15th.

At approximately 2:30 A.M. on the morning of February 14, 1965, Malcolm's home burst into flames, apparently caused by two Molotov cocktails that were thrown inside. A third cocktail bomb was apparently thrown against the back door, but it failed to ignite and died in the grass outside. Malcolm and his family were able to escape the blaze, but half of the home was burned to ruin.

The next day the Muslims claimed that Malcolm had set the fire himself in order to gain sympathy and publicity.⁴⁴ The Muslims cited the fact that Malcolm was due to be evicted shortly and that his motive may have been that if he could not have the home, then no one would have it. Yusaf Shah, then known as Captain Joseph,

discredited the theory that the Black Muslims had set the fire stating, "We *own* this place, man. We have *money* tied up here."⁴⁵

In contrast to Spike Lee's contention that Malcolm's house was burned down by assailants, just as Malcolm's father house had been burned down in 1929, Bruce Perry provides evidence in his book that Malcolm was behind the bombing of his own home. Like Lee, Perry links the bombing of Malcolm's house to the bombing of his father's house. Unlike Lee, Perry contends that both Malcolm and his father were behind the bombing of their own homes, claiming that they were both stubborn and unwilling to concede defeat.

By the time the firemen had arrived, put out the fire, and entered the house, pieces of broken bottles from the molotov cocktail bombs lay all over the house. The captain of one company of firemen was surprised to find gasoline in a number of unburned bottles which was unusual as the gasoline in a molotov cocktail generally was completely consumed when ignited.⁴⁶

The firemen also found a bottle of Dewar's White Label Scotch with no wick standing upright on a dresser in the children's bedroom near the window. Another unshattered molotov cocktail was found later in another part of the house.⁴⁷ The investigators at the scene found it odd that the assailants would have thrown the bombs into the house without lighting and inserting the fuses. Furthermore, it appeared unlikely that a gasoline-filled bottle could have been thrown through a window, a storm window, and venetian blinds, and land on a dresser unbroken. Malcolm later said that his wife Betty had pointed to the bottle in the first place and claimed that the bottle

had been a plant to make it look like Malcolm had started the fire himself.⁴⁸

However, the investigator who discovered the bottle, Hank Thoben, recalled that when he lifted the bottle from the smudge-filled dresser to examine it, there was an absence of smudge beneath the bottle that suggested that the bottle had been placed on the dresser before the fire, not after.⁴⁹ Also, the broken glass from the windows, had spread out into the grass outside, not into the rooms inside the house, suggesting that the bottle had been thrown from inside the house, not outside.⁵⁰

In a press conference following the incident, Malcolm vehemently refuted the charges stating "Do you know what the degree of temperature it was? It was about fifteen or twenty. I stood out in my underwear, barefeet, in the middle of my driveway, with a gun in my hand for fourty five minutes waiting for the police or waiting for the fire department to come. If I wanted to put on a show, I can find a better way than that to put it on."⁵¹

However, a few hours after the bombing, Malcolm flew to Detroit and told a gathering: "I was in a house last night, that was bombed. My own! but I didn't.....It didn't destroy all my clothes."⁵²

The Assassination:

One week after the bombing on February 21, Malcolm was assassinated in the Audubon Ballroom while addressing a group of people gathered at an O.A.A.U. rally. How Malcolm was killed has never been challenged; but who actually killed him and who was

actually behind it has been argued since the assassination took place. In preparing for the film, Lee probably did more research on the assassination than any other section. In his preparation for the assassination sequence, Lee read several new books, scanning through hundreds of FBI files, and interviewing several key figures linked to the assassination plot. Two of the figures that Lee interviewed included Yusaf Shah, and Louis Farrakhan, the present head of the Nation of Islam, who at the time of the assassination was known as Louis X.

A week before the assassination Malcolm's bodyguard, Gene Roberts, who was also secretly working as an informant for the CIA, witnessed what he believed to be a dress rehearsal for the assassination. After viewing the dry run attempt on Malcolm's life, Roberts informed the New York Police who told him that they would pass it on and take care of the problem.⁵³

On the day he was assassinated, Malcolm began his message with the customary Muslim greeting of "Asalaam-alaikum," when a black man in the back of the audience stood up and cried, "Get your hand out of my pocket!" Malcolm called out "cool it brothers, calm down, calm down..." when another black man with a sawed off shotgun ran up to the front and shot Malcolm in the chest with a spray of gun pellets sending Malcolm to fall backward onto the ground. Two other black gunmen followed and shot a fallen Malcolm a number of times before fleeing through the panic-stricken audience, shooting their guns everywhere. The man with the sawed off shotgun disappeared, but the other two gunmen ran towards the front exit. One of the gunmen was able to make it down the stairway

and out the door, but the second gunman, Talmadge Hayer, was shot in the leg by one of Malcolm's guards. He stumbled down the stairs before a mob attacked him.

Hayer was saved by two police officers outside who pulled him away from the angry mob and whisked him away to police headquarters and jailed. After Hayer's initial arrest, two other Black Muslim suspects were brought in, Norman 3X Butler, and Thomas 15X Johnson. A year later, they along with Hayer, were convicted in the assassination of Malcolm X.⁵⁴ In 1986, both Johnson and Butler were released from prison. They had maintained their innocence throughout their twenty year prison term. Hayer has admitted to the crime, but he has refused to name the other participants. In 1992, Hayer was released from prison on a work-release program in Queens.

A number of books and articles have been written concerning Malcolm's assassination, most recently the books: *The Judas Factor: The Plot to Kill Malcolm X*, written by Karl Evanzz, and *Conspiracies: Unravelling the Plot to Kill Malcolm X*, by Zak Kondo. Both Evanzz and Kondo point to the fact that there were five assassins from Temple No. 25 in Newark, New Jersey. According to Evanzz and Kondo, Hayer was the only one correctly sentenced in 1966. Besides Hayer, the other four accomplices named were: Ben Thomas, Leon Davis, William Bradley, and Wilbert McKinney. Lee read both of these books and asserts later in his film that there were five accomplices in the assassination. Lee names only one, Talmadge Hayer in the film credits.

In the summer of 1991, Lee interviewed Yusaf Shah and Louis Farrakhan in an attempt to find out how much the Nation of Islam was behind the assassination. Farrakhan was suspected of being involved in the plot to kill Malcolm because of an article he wrote a few weeks before the assassination in an issue of *Muhammad Speaks* that included an illustration of Malcolm's head being cut off and rolling down a flight of stairs. When interviewed by Lee, Farrakhan would only say that Malcolm was killed by "zealots." When asked about the five assailant's names by Lee, Farrakhan admitted to knowing who they were, but would not acknowledge that the assassins were Black Muslims.⁵⁵

In the interview, Farrakhan also brought up the possibility that the plot to kill Malcolm came from outside the Nation of Islam. Farrakhan insinuated that because of the atmosphere of hate that had been created between the Nation of Islam and Malcolm's followers, an outside organization had stepped in and assassinated Malcolm X. Said Farrakhan: "As Malcolm attacked Elijah Muhammad and we attacked Malcolm, we were creating an atmosphere of murder not just within the Nation. The time was right for any outside force that wanted Malcolm out of the way. Which of them would they hit first? Who was most vulnerable? It wasn't Elijah Muhammad. It was Malcolm X. If you kill Malcolm X, blame it on Elijah Muhammad, you've killed two birds with one stone. We in our ignorance and zeal created this atmosphere."⁵⁶ In short, Farrakhan was raising the possibility that the FBI and the CIA were behind the plot to kill Malcolm.

Clarence Jones, one of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s legal advisors and also a friend of Malcolm's, witnessed the involvement of the FBI in Dr. King's personal affairs firsthand. After reading about the involvement of the FBI and CIA in Malcolm's personal life, Jones believes that they were behind Malcolm's assassination. "Knowing what I now know about what the illegal activities of the FBI did to Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, I have no doubt that the assassination of Malcolm X was calculatedly, premeditatedly, planned by agencies of this government. I don't have any doubt in my mind that's what happened," said Jones.⁵⁷

According to Clayborne Carson's book, *Malcolm X: The FBI Files*, the FBI began monitoring Malcolm shortly after he was released from prison. During his pilgrimage to Mecca in 1964, Malcolm was followed by CIA agents throughout his trip and one night while he was staying at the Nile Hilton in Cairo, he became violently ill. Malcolm suspected that the CIA had poisoned him but journalist Marshall Frady in an article in *The New Yorker* states facetiously that the incident was just a simple case of food poisoning. Says Frady, "having partaken of the fare of Cairo, including that of the Nile Hilton, on several visits of my own there, I can say that I have been poisoned on at least two occasions myself."⁵⁸ Adds Peter Goldman, "There is a lot of folklore that Malcolm was poisoned by the CIA. I don't quite buy that."⁵⁹

CBS News recently discovered that after Malcolm's break with the Nation of Islam, the FBI began forging Malcolm's signature and sending inflammatory letters to Elijah Muhammad and other followers of the Nation of Islam. The purpose was to cause

disruption and deepen the dispute between Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm.⁶⁰

Furthermore, Gene Roberts, Malcolm's bodyguard, worked as an undercover agent for an FBI intelligence agency called the Bureau of Special Services, known as BOSS.⁶¹ Says Lee in his forward to Carson's book, "I see the FBI, CIA, and the police departments around this country as one and the same. They are all in cahoots and along with the Nation of Islam, they all played a part in the assassination of Malcolm X. Who else? King? Both Kennedys? Evers?"⁶²

Yet there is still no direct evidence that the FBI, CIA, or any other governmental agency was directly behind the assassination of Malcolm X. In reality, Malcolm was warned by the FBI of threats against his life assured that the FBI would supply witnesses if he wanted to take the Nation of Islam to court.⁶³

On the day that he was assassinated, Malcolm was offered full police protection outside the Audubon Ballroom. He refused. Malcolm also instructed his guards at the doors not to check anyone for weapons. In fact, there were periods before Malcolm began his speech, that the doors to the Audubon were left unguarded. Said Charles Kenyatta, then known as Charles 37X, one of Malcolm's most loyal followers, "When I walked into the Audubon Ballroom and saw no one on the door, I became very upset. As I went directly to the back of the room, I was told that this was by Malcolm's request. I said, 'don't give me that.....someone in here is playing games.'"⁶⁴

When interviewed by Lee, Shah stated that the FBI and CIA had nothing to do with the assassination claiming, like Farrakhan, that the assassination had been carried out by "zealots."⁶⁵ Shah also

admitted to Lee that he knew all of the "zealots" and when asked if Bradley, Davis, McKinney, Thomas, and Hayer were the five "zealots" involved in the assassination, Shah said, "That's about all of them. You're something Mr. Lee."⁶⁶

Conclusion:

The assassination plot is one of many stories and accounts that are filled with a number of intrinsic details that all need to be examined against Lee's depiction of Malcolm in his film: *Malcolm X*. In the film, Lee recreates sections of Malcolm's life, piece by piece. There are some sections that he appears to *assert* to have happened in the fashion that he portrays them in the film. There are sections where he willingly adds "fictionalized" pieces and props. Lee also shrinks historical figures into composite characters for the sake of "tightening" up the narrative of his film for the purpose of Hollywood standards and treatments. Consequently, it is important to examine how Lee treats sections of Malcolm X's life for the purpose of critiquing his film within a proper historical context.

¹ Arnold Rampersad. "The Color of His Eyes," *Malcolm X: In Our Own Image*. Ed. by Joe Wood. (St. Martin's Press, 1992), 120.

² Joe Wood. "The New Blackness," *Malcolm X: In Our Own Image* Ed. by Joe Wood. (St. Martin's Press, 1992), 12.

³ Spike Lee and Ralph Wiley, *By Any Means Neccessary: The Trials and Tribulations in the Making of Malcolm X* (New York: Hyperion, 1992), 45.

⁴ Wood, 12.

⁵ Rampersad, 118.

⁶ *Malcolm X: The Real Story*. 1992 CBS-News documentary. Produced by Brett Alexander.

⁷ Whitaker, Charles. "Who Was Malcolm X?" *Ebony* Feb. 1992: 120.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

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- 10 Ibid., p. 122.
- 11 Gary Crowds and Dan Goergakas. "Our Film is Only a Starting Point: An Interview With Spike Lee," *Cineaste* 19: 4. (1993): 22.
- 12 John Edgar Wideman. "The Art of Autobiography," *Malcolm X: In Our Own Image* Ed. by Joe Wood. (St. Martin's Press, 1992) 111.
- 13 Rampersad, 126.
- 14 Bruce Perry. *Malcolm: The Life of a Man Who Changed Black America* (New York: Station Hill Press, 1991): IX-X.
- 15 Ibid., p. 2
- 16 Ibid., p. 9.
- 17 Ibid., p. 9.
- 18 Ibid., p. 3.
- 19 Ibid., p. 10.
- 20 Ibid., p. 10.
- 21 Ibid., p. 11.
- 22 Ibid., p. 12.
- 23 Ibid., p. 12.
- 24 Ibid., p. 12.
- 25 Peter Goldman. *The Death and Life of Malcolm X* (University of Illinois Press, 1973), 36.
- 26 Ibid., p. 38.
- 27 Marshall Frady. "The Children of Malcolm," *The New Yorker* 12 Oct. 1992, 68.
- 28 Goldman, 43.
- 29 Perry, 164.
- 30 Ibid., p. 164.
- 31 Ibid., p. 165.
- 32 Ibid., p. 166.
- 33 Goldman, 59.
- 34 Perry, 221.
- 35 Ibid., p. 185.
- 36 Ibid., p. 185.
- 37 Ibid., p. 217.
- 38 Ibid., p. 219.
- 39 Frady, 71.
- 40 "Malcolm X-The Real Story," CBS-News Documentary. 1992.
- 41 Frady, 71.
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- 43 Ibid.
- 44 Goldman, 263.
- 45 Ibid., p. 263.
- 46 Perry, 353.
- 47 Ibid., p. 354.
- 48 Goldman, 263.
- 49 Perry, 354.

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Chapter 4. An Analysis of Spike Lee's *Malcolm X*

Introduction:

Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* was released to the public in late November, 1992. A number of scholars have criticized Lee's preparation and research for the film. "Lee claims to have conducted extensive research in the construction of his screenplay; the film indicates otherwise," writes Colorado professor Manning Marrable, himself a scholar of Malcolm X. "The storyline is essentially an adaptation of Alex Haley's classic text, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*," he continues.¹ As a result, says Marrable, Lee constructs Malcolm as a "mythic hero figure, not an actual political leader who made mistakes, assessed his errors, and went in new directions."² Indeed, one of the main problems with Lee's film regarding historical accuracy, is his faithfulness to Haley's text. Writes Nell Irvin Painter, "While each of these retellings (both Lee's and Haley's narratives) invents a new narrative, neither the book nor the film is congruent with the life that Malcolm Little/Malcolm X lived, day by day, between 1925 and 1965."³

According to critic Shelby Steele, Lee's film is faulty because it fails to explore Malcolm with any historical or political depth. "Spike Lee, normally filled with bravado, works here like a TV docudramatist with a big budget, for whom loyalty to a received version of events is more important than insight, irony, or vision," says Steele. "Bruce Perry's recent study of Malcolm's life, *Malcolm: The Life of a Man Who Changed Black America*, which contradicts much of the autobiography, is completely and indefensibly ignored."⁴

In his defense, Lee does not claim that his film works in the form of a documentary or that his film was the final say on Malcolm X. However, the completed project was what he had envisioned when making the film. Says Lee:

No, this is it, this is the movie I wanted to make. People have told us 'The most important year in Malcolm's life was his final year,' and 'Why didn't you show his whole pan-Africanism thing?' But its limited. We've never said that anyone who sees this film doesn't need to know anything else about Malcolm X. I mean, the man had four or five different lives, so the film is really only a primer, a starting point.⁵

Lee made no such claims before he began production on the film. In fact, his theme was more consistent with the tone that "this was the most important film of his life," and that "he had to be careful, because this film was too important to mess up."⁶ Also, despite claiming that his film is "just a primer" and not necessarily a documentary or an indepth expose' of Malcolm's life, Lee does *assert* a number of facts and incidents to be true which are questionable and not necessarily truthful.

Lee's "spacing" of 'Malcolm X':

At three hours and twenty one minutes in length, Lee splits his film up somewhat unevenly. Lee spends the first sixty minutes of the film focusing on Malcolm's hustling or "Detroit Red" era days with occasional flashbacks to his childhood. A twenty-five minute

interlude depicting Malcolm's life in prison and his conversion to the Nation of Islam follows. Lee then devotes the remaining hour and fifty-five minutes of the film to Malcolm's rise within the Nation, his courtship and marriage, his disillusionment with Elijah Muhammad and his subsequent break with the Nation. Malcolm's international travel and his attempts to establish his own organization, as well as his assassination are also crammed into the final minutes of the film. "As a result," writes Adolph Reed, "the last two years of Malcolm's life-in which he consolidated his role as a national figure-fly by as a blur."

Lee also uses two interesting bookends to the film. Lee begins the film with Malcolm speaking in the background and a giant American flag in the foreground, that slowly burns from the edges inward into an "X." Lee closes his film with a five minute coda that features South African leader Nelson Mandella. Mandella espounds the virtues of Malcolm's beliefs to a class of South African schoolchildren, who in turn along with several young African-Americans state one-by-one, "I am Malcolm X."

"Detroit Red":

Lee begins the film in Boston during Malcolm's hustling days of the early 1940's and uses only periodic flashbacks with voice-over from Denzel Washington (who plays Malcolm in the film) to describe his childhood. As a result, Lee portrays the childhood incidents with little or any investigative depth. In one particular flashback, depicting the death of Malcolm's father, Lee *asserts* that Malcolm's father, Earl Little, was *murdered* by an extremist group. Lee also

asserts that his father's skull had been bashed in with a hammer as his mother desperately tried to tell an unsympathetic life insurance agent whose company is refusing to pay off on the insurance policy.

In fact, Lee uses two flashbacks seen through the memory of Malcolm's "Detroit Red" years to assert that his father had been murdered. Lee also depicts the burning of Malcolm's childhood Lansing home as the handiwork of black-robed white supremacists in the film. Later in the film, Lee links the burning of Malcolm's Lansing boyhood home, to the burning of Malcolm's home in 1965, shortly before his death.

In the portrayal of the death of Malcolm's father, and in the portrayal of the house burnings, Lee fails to give any other side of the story except his own, based directly on Haley's *Autobiography*. Lee does not even open the remote possibility that his father's death could have been an accident. In addition, Lee does not even hint that the fire that started in Malcolm's childhood home, could have been started by Malcolm's father even though evidence provided by Bruce Perry suggests so. Furthermore, Lee gives only the *briefest* mention to Earl Little's violent background when Malcolm's voice-over states that three of his father's brothers "had died violent deaths."

In the case of the life insurance agent, Lee fails to mention that Earl Little had held two life insurance policies at the time of his death or that he often failed to keep up his premium payments on the policies. One of the policies was not canceled because a neighbor friend of the family named Anna Stohr, paid the overdue premium. The policy had not been canceled before because the insurance agent had advanced the sum of money out of his own pocket.⁷

Consequently, the Little family was not as big a "victim" as Lee portrayed it to be after the death of Earl Little.

In short, Lee uses the flashbacks of Malcolm's childhood years during Malcolm's "Detroit Red"-gangster years to depict events as *assertions*, and whisks them away as narrative facts. Lee does not question the validity of the incidents, nor does he provide an indepth context to the events he portrays from Malcolm's childhood. Instead, Lee inserts bits and pieces of Malcolm's childhood within the time frame of Malcolm's days as a street hustler, which further adds to the disruption and distortion of the time frames and facts of Malcolm's youth.

Lee's "flashback" style, may be due in part to Hollywood's demands of tightening the script. To completely analyze the events of Malcolm's childhood would have stretched the film well beyond its already lengthy three hour and twenty minute time frame. However, the events of Malcolm's childhood had a direct effect on his life later on. By whisking through Malcolm's childhood in a "flashback" style, Lee fails to provide a proper context for the historical background of Malcolm X's life.

Furthermore, Lee portrays the flashback sequences solely from the vantage point of Haley's text. He presents them to the audience as fact. As a result, Lee builds the cinematic appeal that Malcolm was incredibly disadvantaged as a child and overcame these obstacles to achieve national prominence later in life.

Composite Characters and Family Members:

In order to "tighten" a film script into a workable style for the purpose of adapting a story into a Hollywood narrative, historical figures are often omitted or molded into composite characters that often represent more than one person. In the case of *Malcolm X*, Lee gives very little mention to Malcolm's family members. This is particularly evident after Lee finishes the "flashback" sequences to Malcolm's youth. In reality, Malcolm's brothers and sisters kept in touch with Malcolm during his prison stay, and three of his brothers, Reginald, Philbert, and Wilfred were all members of the Nation of Islam.

Reginald, who played a key role in Malcolm's conversion to Islam, is depicted briefly by Lee after Malcolm is released from prison, but there is no mention of Reginald's later censure from the Nation of Islam or his mental breakdown afterwards. Before he began filming, Lee did interview several of Malcolm's surviving relatives for background information on Malcolm's life, including his brothers Philbert and Wilfred, and his sister Yvonne. Consequently, it is curious why Lee did not use their characters in his film script.

Lee does portray Malcolm's mother after she suffered a mental breakdown, but only briefly. Malcolm visits her in a state mental health hospital while he is still involved in his hustling days before his prison stay. The other female figure who Lee completely omits from the film, is his half-sister Ella, who played a key role throughout Malcolm's life.

"One of the most serious gaps in Lee's film is the fictive erasure of Malcolm's half-sister, Ella Little," writes feminist critic Bell Hooks.

"A major influence in Malcolm's life, Ella, along with their brother, Reginald, converted him to Islam and helped educate him for critical consciousness. By not portraying Ella or referring to her influence, Spike creates a fictive world of black heterosexuality in which all interaction between women and men is over determined by sexuality, always negotiated by lust and desire. Conveniently, this allows the film to reinscribe and perpetually affirm male domination of females, making it appear natural."⁸

In place of a number of figures in the film, Lee uses a composite character named Baines, who converts Malcolm to Islam in prison and weans him from his drug dependency. Baines plays a key role in Malcolm's rise in the Nation of Islam, and eventually contributes to the creation of the atmosphere that led to Malcolm's break with the Nation. In reality, Lee uses the composite Baines character to represent a figure named Bembry who played a partial role in Malcolm's conversion to Islam in prison, and Louis X (now Louis Farrakhan) who played a key role in Malcolm's split with Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam.

Bembry, whose full name was John Elton Bembry, was something like the prison guru who encouraged black prisoners to "educate themselves" at the time that Malcolm entered prison in 1946. According to an interview with Bembry, conducted by Bruce Perry, Bembry started Malcolm on his rise to self education when he bluntly told an ignorant Malcolm to start "using his brains."⁹ From that point on, Bembry lead Malcolm to read and explore the texts of the prison's library including everything from *Aesop's Fables*, to

Shakespeare's *Macbeth* in a continuing quest for self knowledge and education.¹⁰

However, Bembry never became a member of the Nation of Islam and never played a role in Malcolm's conversion to the Nation or Malcolm's demise within the Nation. Malcolm's brothers, particularly Reginald and Philbert, played the largest roles in Malcolm's conversion to the Nation of Islam, writing letters to Malcolm in prison, and urging Malcolm to write to the "Honorable Elijah Muhammad."

In Lee's film, the composite Baines character plays all of these roles for Malcolm, most likely for the means of simplifying Lee's narrative. Nevertheless, in his use of Baines as a composite character, Lee omits some key individuals who played large roles in Malcolm's life during his rise and fall within the Nation of Islam.

One of the key characters that Lee omits, is Louis X, later known as Louis Farrakhan, the present leader of the Nation of Islam. Originally a Calypso singer in a Boston nightclub, Louis was recruited by Malcolm into the Nation of Islam during the mid 1950's. Louis became one of Malcolm's chief disciples, studying and imitating Malcolm's powerful style of speech and later taking over leadership of the Nation's Boston mosque.

But as Louis X grew in power within the Nation, his loyalty remained faithful to Elijah Muhammad, not Malcolm. At mass rallies held by the Nation, Louis X was often pictured standing right by the side of Elijah Muhammad. After Malcolm discovered that Elijah Muhammad had fathered several children among his secretaries, Malcolm began spreading word of the scandal to some of his fellow

Black Muslims, including Louis X. Malcolm's move backfired however, as Louis X and several other Muslims turned around and told Elijah Muhammad of Malcolm's betrayal.¹¹

As Malcolm's demise continued within the Nation of Islam, Louis X began to grab some of the power that Malcolm had lost and eventually became Elijah Muhammad's chief spokesman himself. In Lee's film, however, the "fictional" Baines character is portrayed filling the role that Louis X played in the Nation of Islam and in Malcolm's break with the Nation.

Like Malcolm's family members, Lee interviewed Louis X (Farrakhan), before he began filming *Malcolm X*. In his interview with Farrakhan, Lee was warned to portray Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam in a "positive light."¹² Despite filming *Malcolm X* in the 1990's, the Nation of Islam remained a legitimate physical threat to anyone who might injure the organization in the public eye. As a result, like some of the early scriptwriters for the film, Lee proceeded with caution in his portrayal of the Nation and some of its characters.

To his credit, Lee does portray Elijah Muhammad's infidelities with his secretaries in a complete manner despite the warnings of Farrakhan. Nevertheless, Lee is not bold enough to use any other specific names within the Nation of Islam who contributed to Malcolm X's downfall. Instead, the composite Baines character works as "filler" to allow Lee to skirt around some of the stickier issues within the Nation of Islam.

Another character who played a key role in Malcolm's life in the Nation of Islam, is Captain Joseph, now known as Yusaf Shah. At

the time of Malcolm's involvement in the Nation of Islam, Shah headed and trained the Nation's powerful security force known as the Fruit of Islam. Like Farrakhan, Lee also interviewed Shah before he began filming his movie in order to gain historical information on the life of Malcolm X. In his interview with Lee and in an interview with CBS News, Shah admitted a number of key facts about Malcolm's fall within the Nation of Islam, calling Malcolm a "traitor" and a "Judas." There appears to be little doubt from the interviews that Shah held some sort of knowledge about who was involved in the plot to assassinate Malcolm and who was behind it.

Yet Shah, nor any other member of the Fruit of Islam, is specifically mentioned in Lee's film. Like Farrakhan, Shah warned Lee about how he should portray the Nation of Islam in his film which perhaps may explain Lee's omission of Shah or any other specific member of the Fruit of Islam in the film.

The Nation of Islam:

Furthermore, Lee does not delve into any of the bizarre aspects of the Black Muslim religion involving "mad scientists" named Yacub or spaceships releasing deadly bombs on the Earth. He also refrains from looking into the corruption within the Nation of Islam, except Elijah Muhammad's paternity problems.

Malcolm's fiery rhetoric is toned down considerably in the film. Malcolm's famous phrase, "the white man is the devil" is never used in any of his speeches in the film. Malcolm does refer to "devils" a few times such as "the devil's newspaper," and "the devil's chickens coming home to roost." However, the closest he comes to uttering the

phrase, "the white man is the devil" in the film is when he answers a reporter's question, "I've said white people are devils," leaving his present tense position on the white race in doubt.¹³

Many other controversial quotes from Malcolm are omitted as well. For instance, in 1962 not long after seven unarmed Muslims had been shot by Los Angeles police, Malcolm began preaching that "Allah would wreak his revenge on the white man."¹⁴ Shortly after the shootings, a chartered jet carrying many of Atlanta's white cultural elite, crashed at an airport in Paris, killing all 120 passengers. Malcolm interpreted this event as divine providence from Allah.

"I would like to announce a very beautiful thing has happened," Malcolm told a Muslim rally in Los Angeles. "As you know, we have been praying to Allah....And I got a wire from God today. Allah dropped an airplane out of the sky with over one hundred and twenty white people on it. We will continue to pray and we hope that every day another plane falls out of the sky."¹⁵ Nowhere is this incident mentioned in Lee's film, most likely because it would have been too shocking to white audiences and hurt Lee's cross-over appeal.

Perhaps the most pointed quote from Malcolm in the film, is when a young naive' white Harvard female student asks Malcolm if there is anything she can do to further his cause. Malcolm's answer, quoted directly from Haley's text, is "Nothing."

As for the roots of the Nation of Islam, the mystical W.D. Fard is not mentioned, although his likeness hangs in Elijah Muhammad's office in the form of a photograph or painting. However, the

painting-photograph is never referred to, and unless a viewer had done extensive research and preparation beforehand, the picture-photograph would have absolute no bearing or meaning.

There are some incidents in the film that occurred during Malcolm's involvement in the Nation of Islam that Lee follows closely, and apparently has done some significant research on. In the case of the Johnson Hinton incident, Lee recreates the entire scene extensively, with members of the Fruit of Islam marching and standing in order outside the police station, and later at the hospital where Hinton was being cared for. In dramatic fashion, Lee also uses the police officer's phrase to Inspector McGowan at the scene that "No man should have that much power."

Lee does "document" Malcolm's statement of "the chickens coming home to roost" after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in a thorough manner. Lee portrays Malcolm's statements in a cinema verite' style, using a recreational black and white newsreel effect. In the scene, Malcolm exits a building after giving a speech and utters the phrase that he sees Kennedy's death as a case of the "chickens coming home to roost." The inference of the statement by Malcolm X, is that the hate in white men didn't stop with the killing of blacks, but had struck down the nation's chief of state as well.

Elijah Muhammad's command to his ministers in the Nation of Islam was to refuse to comment on the matter if pressed by the media. Malcolm's disobedience earned him a silent censure of ninety days by Muhammad which Malcolm humbly accepted and Lee skillfully depicts. During his censure, Malcolm spent a great deal of

time with the braggadocios heavyweight boxer Cassius Clay who had become one of Malcolm's pupils and was about to convert to Islam and change his name to Muhammad Ali. Malcolm X in fact, spent a great deal of time with Clay's training entourage before Clay's 1964 heavyweight championship fight in Miami.

Later on, Clay, then known as Muhammad Ali, was forced to break off his friendship with Malcom because of pressure put on him by Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam. Except for one black and white photograph of Ali posing with Malcolm during the five minute salutary coda to Malcom X at the end of the film, Lee does not mention or give any historical context to Muhammad Ali's friendship with Malcolm.

By failing to depict Malcolm's friendship with Muhammad Ali in a satisfactory manner, Lee fails to depict Malcolm's wide influence to African-Americans during the 1960's. Malcolm X's influence spread not only to the average working African-American, but also to entertainers and athletes in the sportsworld. Lee does link Malcolm's influence on actor Ossie Davis as Davis rereads the eulogy that he gave at Malcolm's funeral at the end of the film. By failing to portray Malcolm X's friendship with Muhammad Ali in a deeper fashion, Lee misses an opportunity to portray Malcolm's influence to a figure who is still alive and still regarded as one of the most famous athletes of all time. Consequently, Lee misses an opportunity to link the past with the present.

As stated before, Lee does give extensive detail to the scandal of Elijah Muhammad fathering children with some of his personal secretaries. However, Lee fails to mention that Malcolm was one of

the driving forces behind the public outcry over the scandal. In Lee's film, the scandal is first mentioned when Malcom's wife Betty hands Malcolm a newspaper with the scandal printed across the headline. Malcolm, who has heard the rumors, then makes individual visits to each of the secretaries to find out the truth.

In reality, there was no press publicity over the scandal until Malcolm X instructed three of Muhammad's secretaries to file affidavits, and two of them to file paternity suits against Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam.¹⁶ Up until that point, the press had refused to report on any accusations over Elijah Muhammad's infidelities for fear that the Nation of Islam would retaliate with a libel suit. Malcolm knew this, and as a result, he pushed the secretaries into filing public lawsuits that in turn, gave the press free reign to report on the scandal.

Nowhere in his film, does Lee mention this bit of information, instead portraying Malcolm as an "innocent bystander" who was simply taken aback and overwhelmed by the scandal. Lee does not mention the lawsuits and he does not mention Malcolm's involvement in them. He also does not mention that Malcolm received a letter from Yusaf Shah, (then Captain Joseph) stating, "Mr. Malcolm: We hereby officially warn you that the Nation of Islam shall no longer tolerate your scandalizing the name of our leader and teacher the Honorable Elijah Muhammad."

The Pilgrimage to Mecca:

Lee does devote a great deal of attention to Malcolm's pilgrimage to Mecca in 1964. However, viewers who had not done

their research beforehand, would not have known that Malcolm's pilgrimage was his second visit to Mecca, not his first.

During Malcolm's second visit to Mecca, he participated in the holy Islamic pilgrimage called "the Haj." Lee skillfully portrays Malcolm's awakening to normal orthodox Islam and his realization that whites are not "blue-eyed, blonde-haired devils." Lee uses footage actually shot on location in Mecca and rereads Malcolm's "letters of awakening" that Malcolm sent back home to his wife Betty. Through the use of voice-overs from Malcolm, Lee depicts him perusing through the many new wonders of the Arab Islamic world.

Lee also depicts the "tailing" of Malcolm X by the CIA. He uses recreated verite' footage of Malcolm based on home movie films shot by CIA members who followed Malcolm through his journey in Africa. But Lee's portrayal of the FBI tailing his visit to Africa leads one to believe that the FBI and CIA only began monitoring Malcolm during the final months and years of his life. In reality, the FBI and CIA had Malcolm under surveillance ten years before his pilgrimage to Mecca, long before he had become a national figure.¹⁷

Lee does not delve into Malcolm's apparent "poisoning" in Cairo nor does he assert that the CIA did anything to undermine his visit to Africa. In fact, Lee does not portray much more of Malcolm's visit to African, then his pilgrimage to Mecca. In reality, Malcolm visited with numerous heads of state during his second visit to Africa, including visits with Egyptian President Gamal Nasser, Tanzanien President Juluis Nyerere, President Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya, Nnamdi Azikiwe of Nigeria, President Sekou Toure of Guinea, Prime Minister Miltin Obote of Uganda, and President Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana.¹⁸

Lee in response, "People don't know who Kwame Nkrumah. Besides, we didn't have the money."¹⁹ Lee may have lost a point, but the omission of Malcolm's visits with leaders, strips Malcolm of the political world leadership he sought to attain after his break with the Nation of Islam. Says Lee, "Lee's *Malcolm X* is a powerful film. Had he chosen to tell the great man's life, however, making it resonate with the power and integrity of the international phase, the film would be a remarkable, educational, and inspirational."²⁰

Malcolm's House:

In the case of Malcolm's house being burned down shortly after his death, Lee clearly asserts that the home was burned down by individuals, not Malcolm. Furthermore, Lee links Malcolm and his father together as victims of outside forces. Lee connects Malcolm and his father by using a flashback to the burning of Malcolm's Lansing home during the scene that depicts the burning of Malcolm's home in Queens.

When asked by the media in the film if he would respond to allegations that he set his own home on fire, Malcolm turns away and does not comment, which was consistent with Malcolm's behavior at that question at the time. The fictional Baines character says, "We hope this is not a case of Malcolm saying 'if I can't have the home) then you can't have it,'" thereby alluding to the altercation that had taken place the previous summer between Malcolm and Baines over the possession of the home.

ere is no specific mention of the trial over the
 rence to the eviction notice served by Judge Wahl
 ner. Consequently, if the viewer had not
 esearch before viewing the film, the comments by
 e no historical context or meaning.

tion:

assassination of Malcolm X, Lee follows the plot and
 itself with extreme detail. In the assassination
 lm, Lee follows Malcolm's last few days before his
 ily, portraying Malcolm's fear and paranoia over
 th. Lee also depicts the FBI's surveillance of
 thorough and convincing manner with background
 ing Malcolm's impending doom. During the
 up to Malcolm's assassination, Lee uses Jr. Walker
 song, "Shotgun" in the background as Malcolm's
 vey the Audubon Ballroom in a dry run a week
 nation. Lee also uses Sam Cooke's powerful
 , "A Change is Gonna Come." Cooke's song sadly
 en too hard living/But I'm afraid to die" as Malcolm
 ; way towards the Audubon Ballroom the day he is

ssination sequence, Lee clearly portrays five men at
 room involved in the assassination. Lee also
 oberts' testimony that the five men involved in the
 through a "rehearsal" of the assassination a week
 nation in the Audubon Ballroom. Nevertheless,

Roberts in the film. Furthermore, Lee, who
assassins in the film, names only one, Talmadge
credits of the film.

is not speculate about the assassination in his
es in *JFK*. Lee presents the assassination as a
not take the *fictive stance*. Said Lee in an
terniere of *Sight and Sound* magazine:

There is any doubt that the Nation of Islam was
ination. The five assassins were from
work, New Jersey. That's not to say that the
Muhammad ordered the killing, but somebody
the word. And the FBI and the CIA were also
saw it was about to happen but stood back and
top it.²¹

was pronounced dead by a medical examiner,
assassination abruptly, and suddenly cuts to
actor Ossie Davis' famous eulogy working as a
tly, Lee leaves the viewer still searching for
that killed Malcolm X and who was behind it?
on the subsequent bombing of the Nation of
r 1 mosque in Harlem by followers of
s to follow up on the press conference given by
his Chicago mansion denying any involvement
ion by the Nation of Islam. If Lee is so
l Malcolm X and who was behind his

assassination, should not he have followed up on the ensuing questions of Malcolm's assassination in greater detail?

Conclusion:

In conclusion, Lee brushes over a number of characters and events in his film that are key to the development and understanding of Malcolm X's life. Lee holds fast to some of the "myths" created by Haley's book and fails to look at some of the more tragic and negative aspects of Malcolm's life. As a result, Lee paints a picture of a classical hero who lived the life of a true American who overcame many obstacles in his rise from obscurity. Writes Shelby Steele, "In Lee's film, we don't see the 'tragic Malcolm.' This Malcolm is back to conceal, rather than reveal."²²

Steele's analysis of Lee's film is correct. Lee's film moves along unevenly as he devotes a great deal of time to some sections, and very little to others. In addition, he *asserts* some events and figures to be fact, while others he simply glosses over and uses the excuse that he didn't have enough money, didn't have enough time, or just didn't believe someone else's facts.

In his explanation of his film on the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, *JFK*, Oliver Stone states: "I don't know who did it (killed Kennedy). I have a feeling about what happened. I have a feeling. I'm more concerned in a way with why Kennedy was killed than who or how....The why though, is key."²³ In response to Stone's statement, film critic Roy Anker writes, "Unfortunately history is simply not what we want it to be, no matter how desperately we wish or 'feel' it so."²⁴ Anker adds, "In short, when the messy rag-tag

stuff of history, mostly events and people, do not fit what Stone 'feels' or wants to be true, he makes things up."²⁵

The same could be said about Spike Lee and *his* historical film, *Malcolm X*. Lee refuses to give any credence to facts uncovered by scholars such as Bruce Perry, instead clinging to myths from the *Autobiography*. When certain characters or events don't exactly fit perfectly into his narrative, he "makes things up" by gliding over events, and fitting people into composite characters. By doing so, Lee robs some of the historical impact away from *Malcolm X*.

For example, if Lee had not depicted such a "softened" Malcolm during his militant years, but had instead portrayed some of the uglier things he had said and done, would not his transformation after his pilgrimage to Mecca had that much more impact and meaning? Or for instance, if Lee had depicted some of Malcolm's faults, as well as some of the faults of the Nation of Islam, would not the audience have been able to further witness the struggles that Malcolm had to go up against?

Perhaps the biggest difficulty Lee faced when making the film in a balanced and accurate historical style, was the commercial demands of the Hollywood narrative structure under which he operated. In almost all of his films before, Lee created cross-over appeal to white audiences, which Warner Brothers was counting on with *Malcolm X*. With his largest budget ever, and a script that had the film over three hours long, Lee needed the cross over white audience market to make a profit at the box office for Warner Brothers.

Film critic Jesse Rhines calculated that if one assumed an average national admission price of \$4, and that fifty percent of all thirty million African-Americans bought tickets to see *Malcolm X*, the box office return would be \$60 million. However, if fifty percent of white Americans bought tickets, the box office return would be \$400 million. This nearly sevenfold gap on box office return was the determining factor for Warner Brother's decision to seek a white crossover audience as it's primary market, rather than a black audience alone.²⁶

Consequently, Lee "softened" sections of his film, dampening any controversial aspects of Malcolm's life that might turn off any white moviegoers. As a result, Shelby Steele characterizes Lee's film as "part fact, part fiction, and entirely middlebrow."²⁷

Furthermore, Hollywood has never been known for producing large political documents that are highly accurate because they generally fail to draw well at the box office. "The charge of Hollywood has never been to produce functional political documents," says Jacquie Jones. "And were the point of Lee's sixth feature film to capture faithfully the needs of every person of African descent in the United States, it (the film) would have gone unmade as it has been for the past two decades."²⁸

Nevertheless, we don't see the extent of Malcolm's struggles within the Nation of Islam, and we don't see the full extent of his quest for political power towards the end of his life in Lee's film. Consequently, we don't see too much of the "real" Malcolm in Spike Lee's *Malcolm X*.

- 1 Manning Marrable. "Malcolm as Messiah: Cultural Myth vs. Historical Reality in *Malcolm X*," *Cineaste* XIX: 4 (1993): 8.
- 2 Ibid., p. 9
- 3 Nell Irvin Painter. "Malcolm X Across the Genres," *American Historical Review* 98:2 (April, 1993): 433.
- 4 Steele, Shelby. "Malcolm Little: and Big," *The New Republic* 21 Dec., 1993: 30.
- 5 Gary Crowdus and Dan Georgakas. "Our Film is Only a Starting Point," *Cineaste* XIX: 4 (1993): 20.
- 6 Spike Lee and Ralph Wiley. *By Any Means Necessary: The Trials and Tribulations in the Making of Malcolm X* (New York: Hyperion Books, 1992), 15-16, 71.
- 7 Bruce Perry. *Malcolm: the Life of a Man Who Changed Black America* (New York: Station Hill Press, 1991), 13.
- 8 Bell Hooks. "Male Heros and Female Sex Objects: Sexism in Spike Lee's *Malcolm X*," *Cineaste*, XIX: 4 (1993): 15.
- 9 Perry, 108.
- 10 Ibid., p. 109.
- 11 Marshall Frady. "The Children of Malcolm," *The New Yorker* 12 Oct. 1992, 72.
- 12 Lee and Wiley, 54.
- 13 John Locke. "Adapting the Autobiography," *Cineaste* XIX: 4. (1993): 6.
- 14 Frady, 70.
- 15 Ibid., p. 70.
- 16 Ibid., p. 72.
- 17 Marrable, p. 8.
- 18 Herb Boyd. "Malcolm After Mecca: Pan-Africanism and the OAAU," *Cineaste* XIX: 4 (1993): 11.
- 19 Crowdus and Georgakus, 20.
- 20 Herb Boyd, 12.
- 21 James Verniere. "Doing the Job," *Sight and Sound* 3:2 Feb. 1993: 11.
- 22 Steele, p. 31
- 23 Jennet Conant. "The Man Who Shot JFK," *Gentleman's Quarterly* Jan. 1992, 67.
- 24 Roy Anker. "The Kingdom of Wish: Oliver Stone's Problem with History," *Fides Et Historia* 25.2 (1993): 117.
- 25 Ibid., p. 118.
- 26 Jesse Rhines. "Spike Lee, Malcolm X, and the Money Game: The Compromises of Crossover Marketing," *Cineaste*, Vol. XIX, No. 4. 1993: 18.
- 27 Steele, 30.
- 28 Jaquie Jones. "Spike Lee Presents Malcolm X: The New Black Nationalism," *Cineaste* XIX:4 (1993): 9.

Conclusion:

The aim of this thesis has been to establish that Lee uses documentary techniques in his film in an attempt to portray and recreate the historical life of Malcolm X in an accurate form. Consequently, Lee's film should be viewed and judged with a critical eye. For instance, Lee recreates scenes in his film to *assert* that particular events did occur in the historical life of Malcolm X. Lee also uses recreated black and white sequences that resemble cinema verite' newsreel footage used in many documentary films. "This film is not documentary, but wraps itself in manufactured images of documentary truth," says Nell Irvin Painter.¹

There are critics and scholars who would state that Lee's film should be looked upon strictly as a form of Hollywood entertainment. I would argue otherwise. In discussing Oliver Stone's *JFK*, William Romanowski, a scholar of film and popular culture, states that:

No other medium can approximate the realism of film, regarding its ability to allow the viewer to experience, i.e. "hear" and "see" the course of events taking shape in a certain way. By putting even seemingly unrelated actions together into a coherent narrative form, a film can juxtapose people, events, and circumstances in such a way as to offer an interpretation of their meaning and significance. The realism of the cinema, then, charges the artist's interpretation with authenticity, especially for an uniformed audience.²

In the case of Spike Lee's *Malcolm X*, this is especially true. Spike Lee's film may be a Hollywood narrative, but that does not take away the film's ability to portray "realism" through the recreations of Lee, particularly for an uninformed audience that may take his recreations at face value. In a poll taken in 1992 by the black press, 84 percent of those African-Americans queried between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four felt that Malcolm X was "a hero for black Americans today." However, that same poll found that a substantially smaller percentage of that age group knew much about him.³ As journalist and historian Gerald Horne states, "This circumstance presents both a situation ripe for myth making and an indictment of how history is taught in this nation."⁴

Further research performed for Warner Brothers showed in December of 1992 that three-fourths of the members of the audience for Lee's film were twenty-five or older.⁵ However, the vast majority of the public who were over twenty-five and went to see Lee's movie, were likely introduced to Malcolm X through Haley's *Autobiography*. As stated before, Haley's book has been a source of "myth making" in the retelling of the life of Malcolm X.

Like Haley and other biographers of Malcolm X, Lee retells the life of Malcolm X from the viewpoint of an historian, although in this case, Lee works in the form of a cinematic historian. Says Romanowksi:

The cinematic historian, not unlike a cultural historian, analyzes evidence and constructs an interpretation of the interpretations in search of meaning. The task is to work the

facts, the substance of an event or experience, into meaning, i.e. forms and patterns that make the event understandable and highlight its significance. Such an interpretation is inevitably based on the information and knowledge available to the interpreter and influenced by current social, cultural, and ideological trends. What this amounts to is a reconstruction of past events presented in a different cultural context and form.⁶

This is true in Lee's film. The cultural context surrounding Lee's film in the 1990s is vastly different than the cultural context that surrounded Malcolm X in the 1950s and 1960s. The cultural context of the 1990s preserving the memory of Malcolm X today appears in the form of rap music with violent "gangsta" messages from hard edged groups such as Public Enemy. It is also represented by material commodities saluting Malcolm in the form of posters, pins, shirts, and hats. The cultural context of the 1950s and 1960s had none of these things.

There are similarities between the cultural context of the 1990s and Malcolm's time. During Malcolm's time, blacks such as Johnson Hinton were victims of police brutality. The same was true in the 1990s with blacks such as Rodney King. Lee points to these similarities in his film, particularly in the film's bookends with references to the Rodney King beating during the film's opening, and a statement by Nelson Mandella at the conclusion.

The justice that black leaders such as Malcolm X and Nelson Mandella sought in the 1950s and 1960s for their people is still

being pursued in the 1990s. Still, the materialistic cultural context surrounding the memory of Malcolm X in the 1990s is far different than the context surrounding Malcolm during his actual lifetime. To understand that Malcolm X shunned materialism is a key in understanding him in today's society according to Earl Ofari Hutchinson.

There was a more painful truth about Malcolm," says Hutchinson. "His revolt was against the rampant materialism of American society. If he had lived, he would have been repelled by the self-indulgent grab for expensive cars, clothes, and cash by the MTV generation. He would not think it 'cool' for young black men to harangue black women with the 'B' and the 'H' words, or each other with the 'N' word. He would rail against Hollywood and the record industry's obsessive glorification of the 'gangsta' lifestyle.⁷

In short, the materialistic context of the 1990s had a direct effect on Lee's historical interpretation of the life of Malcolm X. In his promotion of the film, Lee constantly pumped the many "X" items to the younger MTV generation to assure them that Malcolm X was "hip" and "cool." In the film itself, Lee softened any controversial aspects of Malcolm's life so that the film would appeal to both blacks and whites at the box office. Furthermore, Lee did not explore Malcolm's political life indepth for fear that the film would "go over the heads" of the MTV generation and not appeal to them.

The final box office totals for *Malcolm X* were just under \$48 million, far short of the large crossover audience that Warner Brothers and Lee had hoped for.⁸ Despite the slow box office turnout, millions were still made off of the many "Malcolm X" commodities sold in promotion with the film. But not long after the film came out, the t-shirts, hats, and pins, and buttons disappeared. Says Hutchinson, "Black youth and Madison Avenue had rescued Malcolm from a forgotten netherworld, and now they quietly returned him there."⁹

Concludes Hutchinson, "Perhaps it's just as well. Malcolm X was never designed to be a mass market commodity. He certainly wouldn't have wanted that. Malcolm looked into the scarred abyss of his life and American society and resolved to change both. This is what made Malcolm the man that he was. This is not the stuff of myth, but of reality."¹⁰

There are many flaws in Spike Lee's historical interpretation in *Malcolm X*. Some of Lee's flaws are due to the demands of Hollywood, but others are simply due to Lee's own stubborn position to disregard any position on the life of Malcolm X other than his own. Perhaps Lee's biggest fault is his refusal to look at some of the more tragic and negative aspects of Malcolm's life.

There are many sections of Lee's film where he recreates the historical life of Malcolm X with extreme precision. However, there are other sections where his recreations resemble "myth" more than "reality." Nevertheless, *Malcolm X* is a powerful film that focuses on one of the most dynamic black leaders in the twentieth century. Because of the power and impact of film, particularly among an

uninformed audience, Lee's interpretation of Malcolm's life should be viewed with a critical eye.

Lee's film is not the first motion picture to explore the life of an historical figure and it certainly will not be the last. In his portrayal of an historical figure within a narrative context, Lee uses many different cinematic techniques. Some of these cinematic techniques are from the documentary mode and some are from the mainstream tradition of Hollywood. In the process, truth and accuracy in the portrayal of an historical figure becomes blurred at times. In order to explore historical truth and accuracy in Hollywood historical films, cinematic techniques, historical research, and commercial demands must be examined. Consequently, *Malcolm X* is one of only many historical films that should be viewed carefully now, and in the future.

¹ Nell Irvin Painter. "Malcolm X Across the Genres," *American Historical Review* 98:2 (April, 1993): 434.

² William Romanowski. "Oliver Stone's *JFK*: Commercial Filmmaking, Cultural History, and Conflict," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 21.2 (Spring, 1993): 64.

³ Gerald Horne. "'Myth' and the Making of 'Malcolm X,'" *American Historical Review* 98: 2. (April, 1993): 448.

⁴ Ibid., p. 448.

⁵ Ibid., p. 449.

⁶ Romanowski, 65.

⁷ Earl Ofari Hutchinson. "The Disappearance of Malcolm X: A Postscript," *The Black Scholar*, 23:3,4 (Summer/Fall, 1993): 39.

⁸ *Variety Magazine*, March 15, 1993.

⁹ Hutchinson, 39

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 39.

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